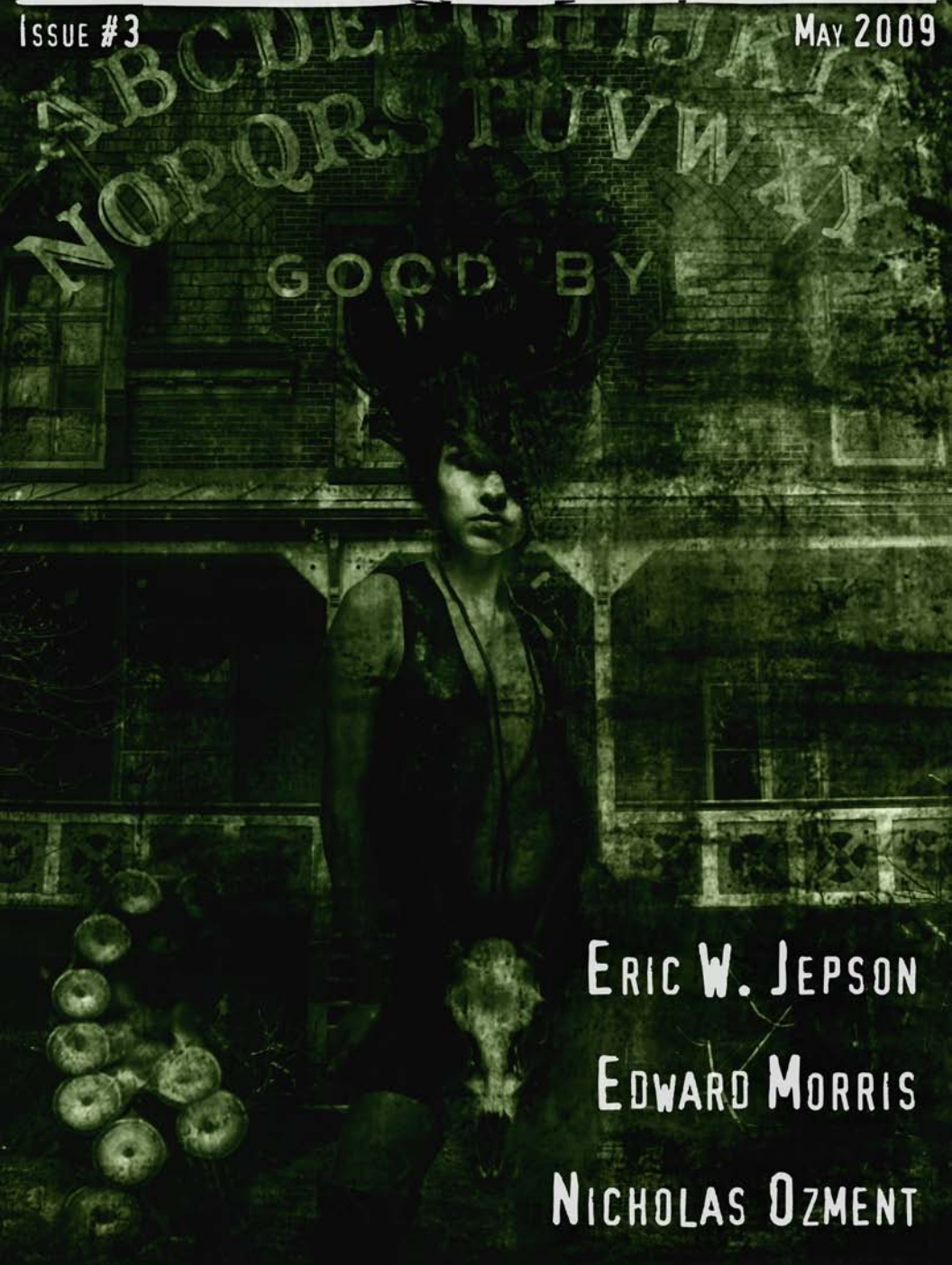


Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #3

MAY 2009



ERIC W. JEPSON

EDWARD MORRIS

NICHOLAS OZMENT

COMING THIS SPRING FROM BAD MOON BOOKS



As Fate Would Have It
BY MICHAEL LOUIS CALVILLO
100 SIGNED, NUMBERED
HARDCOVERS

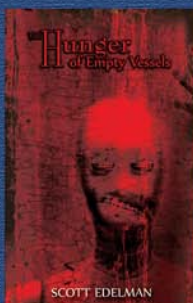


Shadow of the Dark Angel
BY GENE O'NEILL
100 SIGNED, NUMBERED
HARDCOVERS



**The Adventures of
Mr. Maximillian Bacchus
and his Travelling Circus**

BY CLIVE BARKER
1500 SIGNED, TRADE
300 SIGNED, NUMBERED



Hunger of Empty Vessels
BY SCOTT EDELMAN
150 SIGNED, NUMBERED
TRADE PAPERBACKS



Necropolis
BY JOHN URBANCIK
150 SIGNED, NUMBERED
TRADE PAPERBACKS



The Better Year
BY BRIDGET MORROW
100 SIGNED, NUMBERED
TRADE PAPERBACKS

— AND THIS SUMMER DON'T MISS... —

This Ghosting Tide by Simon Clark
300 SGD# TPB

The Lucid Dreaming by Lisa Morton
150 SGD# TPB

Doc Good's Travelling Show by Gene O'Neill
200 SGD# TPB

Crimson by Gord Rollo
100 SGD# HARDCOVER

The Gray Zone by John R. Little
250 SGD# TPB



Arkham Tales

A MAGAZINE OF WEIRD FICTION

Issue #3

May 2009

SHORT STORIES

- 5 The House on Waterloo Lane Nicholas Ozment
- 13 Road Rage J.C. Koch
- 33 Unnatural Blonde Rob Brooks
- 45 The Old House Nandi Ekles
- 52 Happy St. Patrick's Day Eric W. Jepson
- 65 The Diet Maura McHugh

NOVELETTES

- 15 The Thirteenth Tree J.J. Beazley
- 78 To Soothe the Savage Beast Edward Morris

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 Editorial: The Great Escape
- 4 Letters to the Editor
- 99 Contributor Notes

Cover art for this issue, "Wraith Skull," is copyright 2009 by George Cotronis. All other artwork adapted from public domain sources.

Editor & Publisher Nathan Shumate
Editorial Board Crispin Burnham, Christopher B. Jackson

Arkham Tales is published four times a year by Cold Fusion Media Empire. All work contained herein is © 2009 Cold Fusion Media Empire or the respective author. This magazine is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License. Contributor guidelines and advertiser information available at <http://www.arkhamtales.com>. Address all editorial inquiries to arkhamtales@gmail.com.

EDITORIAL: THE GREAT ESCAPE

Nathan Shumate

“Escapism” is such a pejorative term.

The first great flowering of American popular media came in the '20s and '30s, coincident with Great Depression. It wasn't an era overflowing disposable income and leisure time (though being jobless does tend to open up the schedule), putting the lie to the great psychological fable that came after called “Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.” The pulps, paperback novels, comics and movies enjoyed unprecedented distribution and consumption—not in spite of the economic situation but because of it.

Were the audiences for these media seeking “escape” from their depressed lives? I suppose that word works in academic circles, in which the division between “literature” on one side and “popular fiction” on the other is assumed. But there's no need for such a self-conscious term. What people sought was entertainment, and the media listed above presented themselves as such. The fact that a certain work is entertainment does not preclude it being art; the two qualities are not at the opposite ends of a spectrum. The movie version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) succeeds quite well at being both. Writer like H.P. Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard have been recognized as artists as well as entertainers, as Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens before them. The most lauded wordsmith in the English language, William Shakespeare, aimed all of his stage plays at the uneducated masses who were simply seeking to be entertained.

That's not to say that the qualities of art and entertainment don't exist separately, without admixture of the other. The majority of pulp fiction and comic books from that “Golden Age” are forgotten because they were forgettable; after the initial flush of novelty for the reader, there was nothing to return to. Conversely, James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) or Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) have been lauded for their artistic merit, but the authors seemed to have deliberately avoid entertaining.

We are now, as you may have noticed, in another economic downturn, from which parallels are being drawn, rightly or wrongly, to the Great Depression. The more naive loudly proclaim that the parallels guarantee a return to popularity of the media of the time (this kind of wishful thinking has been loudest in the comics community, as aficionados hope for a return to mainstream popularity of a medium which has become very much a niche interest). This kind of prognostication confuses medium with content; culture and technology have moved on far enough that no depths of economic distress will spur a renaissance of newsstand comic books, and more than families will gather around the giant multi-tube radio to tune in for their favorite weekly radio programs.

What does endure? What will firmly re-establish itself (if indeed it ever left) in popular culture, if parallels hold true? Entertainment. Exciting, adventurous narratives that expand the horizons and engage the imagination. These are not “mere escapism”; they do not replace the audience's experience. Rather, they broaden it, adding virtual experience to the participant's worldview. That's not escapism which denies and negates reality, any more than the addition of jelly denies and negates the reality of toast.

Bill Cunningham, Hollywood resident and impresario in multiple media, blogs frequently on subjects like this at <http://d2dvd.blogspot.com>. His main theme is “new pulp media”—adapting what has proven itself from the legacy of pulp publishing and adapting it to new media. But the pulps were on the earliest manifestation of the underlying principles in the twentieth century; one could reach back to Shakespeare, or *Beowulf*, or Homer, or the earliest teller of tales around a crude firepit. It's not primitive; it's universal. Story is a human constant.

“Escapism” is a pejorative term. But “entertainment” never will be. ●



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Hi Nathan,

I just wanted to say how much I've enjoyed the first two issues of *Arkham Tales*. I'm spreading the word as far and wide as humanly possible. I think it's great that you have now added the option to print the issues at home, too. Would you consider adding a third option—namely a version of *AT* available through a POD publisher like Lulu.com? I know I would definitely buy a copy in this format (especially as my home printing capabilities are limited), and, as a future contributor to *AT*, I would be looking at buying several copies of that issue, for sure. I know this option would mean more time spent creating another PDF format, but on the plus-side there would be no financial cost to you, the publisher, and it might also bring in more revenue for the magazine. Just a thought.

To *Arkham Tales'* continued success,
Best wishes,
Lee Moan

Lee, I've taken a cursory look at the services available from the POD printer CreateSpace, and might consider that kind of POD version of the magazine in the future. I suppose the question is whether there is enough interest in a hardcopy version of the magazine to make the added effort worthwhile.

Nathan

**Please address letters to the editor to
arkhamtales@gmail.com with "letters to the editor"
in the subject line**

THE HOUSE ON WATERLOO LANE

Nicholas Ozment

Thomas Cowell was a short, stocky man with a military crew cut. Folks around the office called him the General. He went out to show a home like he was marching to war; each new prospective homebuyer was a new hill to be taken. He took no prisoners, never met a piece of property he could not sell, save for one. That defiant property was the house on Waterloo Lane.

Bob looked up from his computer, mildly curious when he saw the key that Thomas had grabbed from the wall. "General, you're showing that house? Why bother? They know its history, don't they?"

"Yes, they know it, I think. Some of it." Thomas shoved the key-ring in his trouser pocket and walked back to his desk. "The market is so dead right now, I've got to take any long shot that comes along."

"That's the spirit! To sell real estate, you've gotta have brass balls!" Bob pulled his brass balls from a desk drawer and dangled them above his monitor. They were a close replica of the prop Alec Baldwin displayed in *Glengarry GlenRoss*, always on hand for Bob to deliver the line and chuckle at himself in a never-ending loop of self-referential post-irony.

Thomas shook his head, having heard Bob's shtick at least a hundred times. As he snapped shut his briefcase, he said, "Actually, they sounded a wee bit intrigued."

"Oh no," Bob said, dropping the brass balls back in the drawer and slamming it shut. "That kind."

"What does that mean?"

"New demographic, General. People in the market for a gen-u-ine haunted house. If you can find a buyer like that, more power to you. For them, the ghosts of a multiple homicide are a *selling* point."

Thomas just huffed, snatched the handle of his briefcase and set forth, steeling himself for another disappointment.

He pulled his silver BMW to the curb behind a hunter-green Prius. The young couple was already standing halfway up the walk to the

front porch, staring up at the slate-gray structure like they were ogling some strange beast at the zoo.

"Hello, I'm Thomas Cowell. You are Mr. and Mrs. Saxon?" He proffered his hand, giving a firmer shake to the man.

"Call me Brad."

"And I'm Angela. So this is the legendary 'Pain House'?"

Thomas smiled crookedly, like he'd just bitten into a sour apple and was trying to put a good face on it.

"I don't think I've ever heard it called that before," he lied. He had heard it called that many times, and it pained him every time. Who wants to buy a house with a name that promises pain? What kind of buyer is going to say, *Oh, it's painful to live there? We'll take it. We're into masochism.*

Well, maybe he was looking at that kind of buyer. Brad looked as giddy as a boy who just asked his dream girl to the prom and she said yes. And Angela had that familiar look on her face of the interested buyer who is trying not to look too interested. If twelve years in real estate had not equipped him with a near-intuitive ability to recognize it, he wouldn't have believed it. This *was* Pain House, for *Chrissake*. Why was he picking up signals not dissimilar to the anticipation of kids about to be get a tour of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory?

The Saxons looked like a professional, upwardly-mobile couple. But he prided himself in being able to read people—who they were underneath the picture-perfect exterior. Angela had short, blonde locks, but he could picture a younger Angela, hair dyed black, with black mascara and eye shadow. Maybe he was over-imaginative—and his imagination could be a tad judgmental—but he could still pick up a whiff of Goth. Maybe it was the rim of dark tattoo ink that occasionally peeked above the neckline of her blouse. Or the earrings—Egyptian ankhs dangling from her lobes. Maybe it was just something in her eyes—something acquainted with the dark.

And clean-shaven Brad. His mind projected Brad back to the '90s, to the excesses of youth. He almost smiled, seeing him with a Mohawk, maybe some purple streaks in his hair. And how much ink was concealed beneath that conservative business suit? Some of the guys at the office had once gotten into a debate about what to call the generation after Gen X. How about Gen Ink? The Illustrated Generation. Pierced and tattooed, they wore their ids on their skin. Later, as they moved into offices and cubicles, their superegos had to cover up their artistic indiscretions.

"So?..." Brad prodded, waiting expectantly for the show.

Snapping himself out of the moment of armchair analysis, Thomas erased the look of bemusement from his face and replaced it with a reassuring smile. "Right this way, Brad and Angela. Imagine yourself coming home to this..."

When he turned toward the house, fishing from his pocket the key-ring with its blocky orange plastic tag stamped 134—numbers that were worn from years of use showing a house that never sold—he had that familiar sensation. It was momentary, and he had learned to conceal it. It was like he had walked into an invisible hand pushing against his chest. Stubborn, resolute, the General shook off the impression and pressed on. Business before emotion.

He was a veteran at strolling through strangers' bedrooms, nonchalantly showing their most intimate spaces to other strangers. But at 134 Waterloo Lane, he always felt like a trespasser.

A trespasser!—even though it had housed no living inhabitants for fifteen years. It was the first house he had shown as a professional real estate agent, in fact. Probably be the last, he thought grimly.

Or maybe not. Not if the Saxons had anything to say about it. They pranced up the stairs behind him as if they had already claimed the house as their own.

134 Waterloo Lane was still in pretty good shape, if a bit dusty, in need of some new paint and a good airing-out. Built in the 1920s, before the Depression hit, it was a bit upper-crusty, even back then, for this neighborhood—as was perhaps best exemplified by the elaborate fountain in the back yard, the central figure of which was a cherub, a vaguely mischievous expression on his face, peeing into the pool. The "Fountain of Blood." Allegedly it had run red with blood on the night of the murders. The credulous claimed it still did. Nonsense. Although, admittedly, there was that one evening when out of the corner of his eye he could have believed the water took on a dark hue. He had stayed late that evening to pick up broken glass from a back window—a prospective buyer (prospective buyer number thirteen, to be exact, for he kept a tally) had put her hand through the window for no apparent reason. In the gathering dusk, he could have sworn that the water... A trick of the light. Nothing more. The human mind could latch onto any such optical illusion to reinforce what it had already chosen to believe.

It was a blocky two-story, mostly unadorned by the earlier excesses of the "Victorians," quite functional, with a finished, full basement.

Later installations had brought it up to a six-bedroom, three-bath, with all the modern amenities. The single most striking architectural feature was the large cupola with wraparound windows that crowned the structure. People in the neighborhood sometimes claimed to have seen a lone figure standing up there in the cupola, a still, silent sentry. So people talked—apparently unaware that such talk about an unsellable house in the neighborhood only brought down values on all their homes!

As he guided the couple through the rooms, he could not believe their chatter. They knew as much about this house's infamous history as he did—maybe more. "This is where he killed the aunt." "This is where they found the blood trail." "This is the banister—look, where the wood is chipped—do you think that's from the axe blade?" Absolutely morbid.

By the time they reached the upper floor, he could not keep silent. He wanted to exclaim, *What's wrong with you people?*

Instead, he said, "You are aware of the reputation of this house."

"Oh yes," they nodded enthusiastically.

"Because state law binds me to, um, full disclosure, that the house has a reputation of being haunted."

"Of course!"

"That doesn't bother you?"

Angela laughed. "That's what got us interested in it."

Brad concurred. "We couldn't believe it when we heard the Pain House was on the market."

"It's been on the market for fifteen years," Thomas grumbled.

"That's awesome!" Brad said. "There have been so many corroborated phenomena—sounds, smells, orbs, objects moving, shadow people—"

"Full-bodied apparitions," Angela added.

"And it sounds like more than just a residual haunting," Brad noted.

"What, pray tell, does that mean?" This was a new one to Thomas.

"It means intelligent entities. A residual haunting is just like, like a recording of a past event, on a repeating loop. What we might have here are deceased spirits who actively interact with the living."

"Right," Angela added, "which is more common with a violent, traumatic past like this. The spirits have not relinquished their hold on this world and passed on."

The General nodded. He had a knack for transforming houses into

dream homes simply by reading his clients and intuiting their particular dreams, then pitching the house in question as the fulfillment of those dreams. Those instincts kicked in now, and he changed his tack. Details that he had always taken pains to downplay, he now called upon as key selling points. Slyly, he said, "We could arrange for a priest of the religious persuasion of your choice to come out and bless or sanctify the home."

"Oh, no," Angela frowned. "That could spoil it."

"I see. Then it is available to you, ghosts and all. And believe me, ma'am, in twelve years as a real estate agent, I have never known a house with more ghosts."

"BAPS would have a field day in this place!" Brad declared.

"And what is BAPS?"

"The Baltimore Area Paranormal Society," Angela helpfully explained.

"Oh." He still didn't understand. They were nowhere near Baltimore.

"You haven't seen their TV show?" Brad asked.

"I don't watch much television. So, what if a voice came from the walls and told you to 'Get Out'?"

"Oh, then we'd be really hooked! You could probably raise the asking price," Brad chuckled.

Angela elbowed him in the ribs, a none-too-subtle gesture that she didn't want him putting such ideas into the agent's head.

As they walked up the hall to the master bedroom, Thomas gestured to the wall, with its ugly, yellow wallpaper, and said, "I have myself heard rappings on this wall." He opened the door and ushered them into the bedroom.

Brad walked into the master bathroom, and came back out with a grin on his face. "Angela, you've gotta see this. A Jacuzzi bath! That can't be original, eh?"

"No," Thomas confirmed, "That was installed in the '80s. By the last owners of the house, God rest their souls. Although many people are convinced they still reside here." Good God, he couldn't believe what he was saying out loud. But it was a relief, not to beat around the bushes for a change. Maybe today was the day: his ultimate victory, that he could sell even *this* house. Bob could stuff those silly brass balls.

Angela disappeared into the bathroom as Thomas and Brad strolled back out into the main hall.

"Listen, Thomas—can I call you Tom?"

"I prefer Thomas."

"Thomas, let's get serious a moment. You know we're interested in the house. We know you haven't been able to unload it on anybody. I think we can negotiate the price a little."

Thomas inwardly sighed. Yes, they'd probably be willing to knock as much as ten thousand dollars off the asking price. Some of that would come out of his commission, but just to be rid of this albatross would be worth it. Normally, when candidates showed this much interest in a property, his business instincts prevailed, but when it came to this property, he was willing to let it slide.

"Well, yes, the sellers may be a bit flexible on the—"

He was interrupted by a scream. He was only a step behind Brad as they rushed back into the master bedroom. Angela ran into her husband's arms, choking back tears.

"What—what happened?" Thomas asked lamely as Brad helped Angela out the hall and down the stairs.

"Yeah, hon, what did you see?"

"I—I had to use the restroom. Something grabbed me."

"A corporeal manifestation?" Brad cooed. "Did you see the plasma? Um, where did it grab you?"

"From the toilet," she said in a lowered voice, but Thomas, following a few paces behind on the stairs, heard every word.

Her husband tried in vain to console her. "Sweetie, maybe it was a bug or some—"

"It felt like a hand, Brad! It fondled me! Just get me the hell out of here."

Now prospective buyers were being goosed by the plumbing. Thomas shook his head and rubbed his temples with one hand. Twelve years, and the house could still deliver surprises.

Thomas lingered at the foot of the stairs as the couple headed for the door.

Brad glanced back.

Thomas waved feebly in acknowledgment, unable to keep the resignation from his face. "Just go. I'll lock up. You have my card if you're still interested in this charming place." He didn't know why he added that last part; he just couldn't help himself.

Before the door closed, Angela turned and locked eyes with the General. Her mascara was running in streaks down her cheeks—she really did look Goth now.

"You oughta burn this place down," she said. Then the door shut on another failed prospect.

He pulled out a penknife. With a single, deft stroke, he cut the underside of the banister. One more notch added to the dozens that were there, up and down the railing. One for each prospect who had left Pain House unsold. In a fit of pique he had, the first time twelve years ago, cut a mark in the top of the banister—which the Saxons had attributed to the murderer's axe! Since then, he took care not to further mar the woodwork, at least not where the casual observer would notice. But each time he did it, each time he recorded one more failure in its wood, the General hoped that the house felt it. That Pain House felt some pain. God, this house was going to drive him crazy!

That cathartic little moment over, he slid the penknife back into his pocket, feeling a bit foolish, as he always did afterwards. He tossed his briefcase onto the plastic-covered sofa in the front room, then slumped down beside it.

He sat there a few minutes, his mind pretty much empty of anything. Gradually, he became aware that it would soon be dark. Why did they always insist on seeing this property so close to dusk?

He looked around the room, his eyes focusing on nothing in particular in the lengthening shadows. Then he spoke.

"Listen, you bastard. You bloody house. I'm pretty sick of you. Sick of seeing you. But if you don't let someone move in here, I'll—I know!—I'm going to move in myself, just to spite you! Or, or better yet, I'll take her advice—and commit a little act of arson—and then you can have the place all to yourself and wallow in your ashes! How would you like that?!"

He didn't know if someone—if something—heard him. He figured he would find out if his threats made any difference when he showed the house to the next gullible home-shopper. Whenever that might be. The next blue moon. Apparently even people who wanted to buy a haunted house found Pain House a bit too... living up to its name.

He needed a stiff drink. He stood up suddenly, getting that feeling again: he had overstayed his welcome. From the doorway, he cast one last withering look at the gathering darkness in the belly of the inhospitable domicile.

"Pain House?" He addressed the gloom that felt right at home. "Pain-in-my-ASS!"


He slammed the door, and turned the key in the lock.

He did not hear the faint laughter that seemed to come from the

very walls after the echo of the slamming door faded.

It was not a prospective buyer that the House on Waterloo Lane meant to drive mad. No, Pain House was more interested in Thomas Cowell, who had visited it regularly for a dozen years. Though the General was outwardly unflappable, the house could somehow sense the high-tension wire of his mind, which it wound tighter with every visit, each twist bringing him one inch closer to snapping. ●





SHA'DAA

Tales of the Apocalypse

Available now from Altered Dimensions Press
<http://www.cyberwizardproductions.com/alterd/shadaa.html>

"Sha'Daa: Tales of the Apocalypse is a wild mix of the Sci-Fi, Fantasy, and end of the world genres that is well worth the time of any Survival fiction fan."
-Eric S Brown, Author of Season of Rot.


Even in a field that prides itself upon being unique, Sha'Daa: Tales of the Apocalypse, is a most unusual book. With a concept based on a fine story by Michael Hanson, it is not quite a round-robin novel by its many authors, but is somehow more than an anthology...If Lovecraft were around to read Sha'Daa: Tales of the Apocalypse, I think his first reaction would be annoyance ("They're building on my concept"), followed by a giggle or two ("They had a lot of fun doing it"), and ultimately pride ("They updated it and did it right.")
-Mike Remick

11 Authors

One Epic Tale

The Ride of a Lifetime

Are You Ready?



ROAD RAGE

J.C. Koch

Tessa looked out the car window. She spent all her time looking out the car window. That way, she didn't have to look at anyone else in the car.

"We're lost again. Why can't you ever manage to read a map right?"

"Well, if you didn't always just floor it any time I ask you to slow down, maybe I'd be able to see the street names."

Her father and mother were like this all the time. It would be easier if her father let her mother drive while he looked at the maps. Mom was the better driver and Dad had been a navigator or something in the service. But no. Dad never let Mom drive. Her parents fought about this all the time, but Mom always let Dad win. Tessa wondered why they'd ever gotten married, let alone had four children.

"I wanna stop and eat."

"I want to go do something fun."

"Why do we take these stupid trips anyway? God, I could be at the mall with my friends, having fun, instead of this."

Typically, her youngest brother was hungry, the one just under her wanted to go to an amusement park, and her older sister was too cool to enjoy a family vacation. Tessa just kept on looking out the window. If she looked at any of them, she'd have to admit how much she hated them.

They whizzed along, the billboards and telephone poles moving past her window so quickly it reminded Tessa of when her teacher showed them a movie and slowed it down just enough so they could see each frame going past. Tessa wondered what movie would play if they went fast enough.

The car lurched forward. "Why are you going so fast?" her mother yelled.

"It's not me," her father hissed. "The damn accelerator's stuck or something."

"Oh, great," her sister shrieked. "We're going to die!"

Tessa wondered if the car was as sick of her family as she was. She watched the telephone poles flashing. They were now going fast enough where there was a movie out her window.

It showed their car, racing out of control, smashing into a big semi-truck. Tessa saw their bodies, crumpled, smashed, and in her sister's case, cut in half. Then she saw herself walk away from the crash, unhurt, looking perfectly fine.

A man stood there, in the movie outside her window. He was in a black suit, and he looked very clean and neat. He cocked his head at her. Tessa knew what he was asking.

She smiled at him, as she heard her mother and sister both start screaming. "Yes," she said, hearing the squeal of brakes that weren't working and her father cursing. "That sounds good to me."

There was more noise—the semi's horn blowing, screaming and crying from her family, the sound of crunching metal—and then silence. Tessa finally looked around. Everyone was dead, just like she'd already seen. Her sister looked particularly horrible, but Tessa didn't spend much time staring. She unbuckled her seat belt, rolled down her unbroken window, and crawled through it.

The man in the suit was waiting for her at the side of the road. "Well done," he said warmly.

"Thanks," Tessa said. "What happens now?"

"Now," he said, with a wide smile, "now I put you to work again. There are so many other trips to take."

Tessa nodded. "As long as I get a window seat."

"Always," he said, as he took her hand and they walked away. "Always." ●



THE THIRTEENTH TREE

J.J. Beazley

*...what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.*

This melancholy reflection is made by no ordinary mortal, but a Prince of Denmark—tortured by grief and the need for vengeance, teetering on the edge of insanity and musing on the state of death.

But what of the dreams of more mundane folk: the factory worker living in Birmingham with only the form of his local football team to worry about, the stockbroker settled comfortably in the Home Counties; or, in my case, the freelance photographer living at a quiet spot on the Northumberland coast with few real cares apart from the insecurity of never being sure that the next commission will come in soon enough to pay the rent?

And what are dreams anyway? Philosophers, mystics and scientists have been offering various explanations for as long as there have been philosophers, mystics and scientists. Are they merely part of some cerebral activity to be explained away as electrical impulses in the synapses? Maybe that is the mechanical explanation, but what drives the mechanics? As you go deeper into what proves to be a very deep question, you have to wrestle with the capricious and elusive workings of psychology. And then, deeper still, you are inevitably faced with the final question: what is reality? At that point you reach the edge of a continental shelf, and before you lies an abyss of unfathomable depth in which logic, as it is usually perceived, has little or no place.

My dreams, at least those I remember, are like everybody else's: vague, disjointed, full of contradictions and distortions—usually explainable as the reworking of things that have happened to me in "real life." But one dream was very different. That one was clear and logical, and seemed to be a viewing of events happening in real time. And what I learned the following day confirmed that either the most

unbelievable coincidence had occurred, or that dreams can be much more than mere synaptic flashes.

It happened three years ago, when I was that freelance photographer living in a quiet spot on the Northumberland coast at a place called Dryburgh Bay. I had rented an old farmhouse that had become vacant when the tenant farmer, finding it increasingly difficult to eke out a meagre living from the poor land behind the dunes, had decided to retire. The land had been leased to another farmer in the vicinity, the outbuildings were up for sale, and the previous occupant had moved out to live with one of his daughters in the city.

Although Northumberland is in England, I had felt from the outset that there was nothing “English” about the landscape—at least, not English as I understood the term. I came from the Midlands shires where the land is a fertile patchwork of well-manicured fields, dotted here and there by tidy black and white dairy cows. This landscape was very different.

The poor soil made the grass look dull and lifeless, sparse tufts of marram struggled to colonise the sand dunes, and the cows were a strange, straggly bunch of all sizes and colours that looked as though every genetic misfit of their kind had been brought together in one place. Even the light had a piercing clarity that made the starkness seem all the more stark.

I had moved there in late March and, during my first night in the house, had been woken in the early hours by the most cacophonous din. It had been the sound of the roof slates clattering loudly in a gusting easterly gale coming off the North Sea. The following morning I had looked out of the window and felt a profound sense of being in a foreign country.

The front of the house faced south and overlooked a narrow lane, beyond which was a dull, green-brown vista comprising poor grassland and marshy areas with pools occupied by waterfowl. It was the same to the north behind the house. To the east was the cold North Sea, fringed by sand dunes that rose to the height of a house in places, protecting the wetland behind them from the high spring tides. The lane ran west for about a mile up a shallow hill to a village called Waddington where it joined the main coast road.

The village was something like the civilisation I was used to. It had trees, cottages, a pub, an old church and a post office. I used to walk there several times a week to post my mail and gaze at the familiar plants in the cottage gardens.

It took me several months to get used to living there, but I did eventually find an uneasy peace with the place and came to respect its wild and unkempt air. Freelance photography can be an irregular and insecure occupation and I would sometimes go without work for weeks at a time. I used the empty days to discover this new and unfamiliar landscape on foot; sometimes walking on the dunes to watch the seabirds dive for fish, sometimes following the slow meanderings of the waterfowl on the pools, and sometimes marveling at the shifting levels of the beach and the ever-changing colours of the sea—from electric blue on a calm spring morning to near-black when the onshore wind blew and the eastern sky took on the slate grey of an approaching storm.

I found an old ruin too, standing alone on the rough scrubland behind the house. I learned that it had belonged to the Knights Hospitallers during the Middle Ages, and was now quiet and empty apart from the occasional owl standing proudly on top of the stark masonry, hooting mournfully.

My walks up the hill to the village were different; they were sojourns into a more comfortable world. On one of my first visits I took a stroll around the church. It was a simple structure with no transepts, chancel or lych gate like those found in the village churches of the midland and southern shires. It had no tower to speak of, just a simple open bell cote so typical of Northumberland. The heavily weather-worn stone in parts of the structure attested to its age, and the pattern of the older windows was early gothic.

I went inside but found it simple and unspectacular. I came back out and read some of the gravestones. What stories they had to tell. Whole families wiped out in the space of a few months, siblings dying many years apart but always at more or less the same age, two men who appeared to have been brothers but who had the same Christian name and died within a year of each other. It was fascinating stuff that kept me engrossed for an hour or more.

But the really interesting feature lay on the eastern edge of the churchyard. It was an open, airy spot and almost constantly bleak. It overlooked the poor farmland running down to the sea and caught the force of the cold, damp easterlies that kept us living mortals needing several layers of clothing even in the warmer summer spells.

Running along the unfenced fringe of the church’s land were twelve poplar trees. They were arranged in what amounted to a perfectly straight line and were equally spaced, apart from a gap in the middle

between the sixth and seventh. There the gap was twice that between the other trees, as though a thirteenth should have occupied the space. What struck me as odd was the fact that nothing grew in the vacant spot; no grass, no weeds, nothing. There was only barren, brown earth. During my years as a landscape photographer I had visited and photographed many churches and churchyards, and had never seen such an arrangement of trees before. I was intrigued and gave some thought to possible explanations.

The most obvious was suggested by Leonardo's painting of the Last Supper—twelve disciples sitting on one side of the table with Jesus in the middle. Presumably, some devout soul had planted twelve trees to represent the apostles and left a full space in the middle to represent the risen Christ. I was happy enough with that and thought no more about it until I met the vicar a couple of weeks later.

It was a beautiful day in late spring. For once, a southerly wind was keeping the onshore breeze at bay and it was unusually warm down by the coast. I needed to send some mail and so I took a stroll to the village post office. On my way homeward I was walking past the entrance to the churchyard when I saw a man in a clerical collar walking down the path towards the gate. I thought it would be interesting to find out whether there was a known history of the planting of the poplars and waited for him.

He seemed an approachable sort and I stood aside as he unlatched the gate and came out. He smiled at me in that welcoming way that you have a right to expect of vicars. I introduced myself and came straight to the point of my interest. He told me that there was no official record of when they had been planted or who had been responsible, but the presumption was that the trees represented the twelve apostles and the gap the risen Christ. That was the view held by the local diocese. I was pleased to have guessed right. He seemed to hesitate slightly, and then said, "There is another explanation and that one is in writing. But it's highly fanciful and not something the Church likes to dwell on."

He looked uncertain for a moment and then continued. "Oh, why not? I've been dying to tell this story ever since I read it when I first came here five years ago, and you're the first person who's ever expressed an interest."

As we stood there on that warm, late spring day he told me of a document contained within the parish records. The story it told was fantastical enough to make it safe to relate, he said. No one would

believe it in this rational age. As far as I remember the exact procession of his words, this is what he told me.

"Back in 1693 the vicar of this parish was a man with the delightful name of the Reverend Jeremiah Jellicoe—his grave is round by the south wall, but the inscription's all but worn away now.

"During the autumn of that year there was a bad storm which lasted several days and the church roof suffered some damage. The Reverend Jellicoe called in the workmen to effect the necessary repairs and went up into the roof space to assess the damage for himself. Among the dust and rubble littering the floor he found an old leather pouch which contained a folded document written in Latin. The good Reverend was a Latin scholar, as all the clergy were in those days, and he had no difficulty translating it.

"What he read must have put the wind up him a bit. It wasn't only the common herd who were more superstitious in those days; the clergy were ready to see goblins and demons in every dark corner too. Apparently he gave the document to the bishop but made an English translation first, and that's the version that's contained in the parish records.

"The document had been written by a priest called Hugh de Ferrer in 1284. At that time the building was actually the chapel to a manor house which stood nearby and Hugh was the chaplain. The narrative begins in the year 1282.

"As well as being the chapel to the manor house, the church also served the local parish and, one Sunday evening, Hugh was in the confessional—it was Catholic then, of course—when a man stepped in and confessed to having provided the local lord, a powerful baron called Sir Guy de Menton, with his six-year-old son to use in a sacrificial ritual. Apparently there had been a few disappearances among the children of the locality stretching back several years and they had been put down to the wild animals that roamed these parts in those days. The peasant's confession told a different tale.

"It seems that Sir Guy was a Templar Knight and the leader of a thirteen-strong group of like-minded knights from the county who were deeply engaged in hermetic practices, some of which involved the ritual sacrifice of young children. I'm not claiming this to be right, you understand, this is what the document said. According to the peasant, this was where the children had been disappearing to."

I had to interrupt at that point. I had always thought of the Templar Knights as paragons of virtue, wearers of the red cross, the embodiment

of medieval chivalry. My childhood veneration for the gallant knights of Old England had never fully left me and I was inclined to scoff at some silly story that claimed they worshipped the devil and murdered children.

“Well, don’t write the story off just yet,” said the vicar. “I’m not what you would call an authority on the Templars, but I know there are some suspicions regarding the true nature and purpose of their organisation. They were formed during the twelfth century, ostensibly to defend pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. It’s true that their device was the red cross and that they had a reputation as tough and worthy warriors; and I dare say most of them were probably devout, God-fearing Christians. But there is a belief that their function as defenders of the faithful was, or at least came to be, a cover for something darker. Some believe that they were a front for a secret society which more than merely dabbled in the black arts. The same belief surrounds the Masons, who claimed a connection with Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. Some modern writers have suggested that there was a link between the Templars and the Masons.

“At some point, early in the fourteenth century I think, one of the French kings—Philip the second or third—had the Templars disbanded. Slaughtered some of them, tortured many more and confiscated their lands and wealth. There is some mystery over the true reason for such a brutal purge and there are many who claim that it wasn’t just about the politics of wealth and power. There are plenty of books on the subject. Anyway, back to the story.

“Poor old Hugh was at a loss to know how to handle this astonishing confession. He had no reason to disbelieve the man’s story. Lying in a confessional was beyond the bounds of credibility in those days, and why would anyone want to make up such a story? He also had no reason to think that the man was insane. Furthermore, the confessional was sacrosanct so he couldn’t tell anybody about it. And who would he tell anyway? The authorities? Sir Guy was the authority in these parts.

“He considered seeking the advice of the bishop, but he knew that the bishop was a strong supporter of the Templars and feared for his position and even his life. Corruption in high places, eh? Thirteenth century conspiracy theories! According to the document, he agonised over his predicament for a whole week before deciding on a highly unconventional course of action.

“There was a hermit living in a cave, a little way up the coast at

Warkworth. He had, apparently, a somewhat ambivalent reputation; some said he was a holy man, while others believed him to be a pagan magician. Stories of his magical prowess were common in the county, but his actions were said to be generally benevolent and he was left in peace by both the peasants and the local gentry. Hugh decided that he would be worth a try. Being a poor man, the hermit wasn’t likely to be in with the Templars and his magic just might be real— and powerful enough deal with the problem. Direct confrontation obviously wasn’t an option and Hugh was desperate.

“So Hugh paid him a visit. Not that easy in those days, of course. The roads were far from safe even for a priest, and Warkworth must have been a full day’s round trip on horseback. And he had to go alone as the whole business needed to be kept secret. To make matters worse, the cave was on the other side of the river from the road and the weather was particularly bad, so Hugh had some difficulty persuading the ferryman in the nearby cottage to row him across.

“He records the interview briefly, saying that he felt an increasing sense that beings or forces from another realm were close by—he could almost feel their breath on his face, he says. Whether they were benevolent, diabolical or merely disinterested he was in no position to tell. He felt severely unnerved by the atmosphere, and the darkness didn’t help. There was no light in the cave except what little came in from the narrow entrance. All he could see of the hermit was a shadowy figure seated in the corner and wearing some form of long, hooded garment like those worn by monks. He also says that he never saw the man’s face; he kept it turned away from Hugh’s gaze the whole time and it would probably have been too dark to see very much anyway.

“To protect the sanctity of the confessional Hugh told him the story in general terms, and the hermit—Hugh never names him—agreed to help. He told Hugh that he would need something personal from each of the knights and, to help him achieve this, he gave the priest a potion of herbs which was to be poured into their vat of wine. This would knock them out for several hours and it would be safe to cut a few wisps of hair from each man. He said that he would arrive to do the deed when he judged the time to be right.

“As the chaplain, Hugh had free access to the house and had little trouble in doing as he had been instructed. He kept the fragments of hair safe, fearful all the time that he was acting in a manner seriously unbecoming of a good Christian priest.

“Two weeks later there was a knock at his door late at night. Hugh

says that the sight of the hermit in the doorway, lit this time by a single candle, unnerved him somewhat. He describes him as being unusually tall with wild, unkempt hair and a deadness in his eyes reminiscent of a corpse. The hermit said very little, just explained that it had been necessary to come late so as not to be seen in the vicinity. He demanded a promise from Hugh that he would not disclose his involvement during his lifetime and asked for the hair fragments, which Hugh gave him. Then he turned and walked away into the darkness.

“Hugh didn’t know what to expect and admits to having severe misgivings at the prospect of expecting anything at all. He was, after all, a younger son of a genteel family himself, and admits to feeling uncomfortable at the thought of entering some dark conspiracy with a wild cave-dweller against people who were, in effect, his own kind.

“Anyway, life in the village went on as normal until a month later. Hugh says that this was significant as the moon had been dark on the night of the hermit’s visit and it was dark again on the night that Sir Guy had some sort of a seizure. The doctor was sent for, and Hugh was called in to administer the last rites as the doctor thought he might die. He didn’t. He made a complete physical recovery within days but was never the same again mentally. He was listless and pale, all his old aggressive energy had drained away, and he had no will to do anything except wander restlessly around the house and sleep fitfully for up to twelve hours a day.

“Then the visits started. Some of Hugh’s parishioners were employed as retainers at the house and they told him that the visitors included the King’s men, Lord Percy and some of the friends and family of Sir Guy’s twelve companions, none of whom had been seen for weeks. Sir Guy stared emptily into the fire during all the questioning and denied any knowledge of the whereabouts of his erstwhile friends. The investigation eventually petered out and Sir Guy continued to live a reclusive existence in the manor house.

“Hugh was both intrigued and disturbed by the disappearances and predictably laid the explanation at the feet of the hermit. Although his sensibilities as a man of God made him reluctant to discover that he had been instrumental in the workings of some magical art, his curiosity persuaded him to make the arduous journey to Warkworth again to question his collaborator.

“The hermit refused to tell him anything, other than to state that he had done what he’d needed to do: separated the acolytes from their fountainhead and made sure that it would stay that way. As long as Sir

Guy and the twelve knights were kept apart there would be no further trouble. That’s what the priest had wanted and that’s what he had got. No further explanation was needed.

“And that’s what Hugh had to be content with. The knights were never seen again and there were no more incidents of children disappearing.”

As the vicar paused momentarily, I asked him where the twelve trees came into the story.

“Well,” he said, “that’s the interesting bit, and it’s what prompted Hugh to write the whole thing down for posterity.

“Two years later, in the spring of 1284, Hugh looked out of his window one morning to see Sir Guy walking up and down in an agitated manner along the eastern edge of the churchyard. He says that the old man had his hands clasped in front of his chest and appeared to be talking to something on the ground. At first he assumed the old knight’s behaviour to be nothing more than the latest manifestation of his disturbed mental state, but was interested enough to look for himself after the lord had retired back into the house.

“He was surprised to find two lines of strong young saplings growing up out of the rough grass. The two groups of six saplings formed a perfectly straight line but there was a patch of barren earth between them where a thirteenth would have completed the set. He looked over at the house and saw Sir Guy staring back at him with a look of hatred that made his blood run cold. It was the first sign of anything other than apathy that he had seen in the old man’s face since the day of the seizure. He felt sure that Sir Guy now knew what had happened to his friends, and that the look betrayed a hatred for Hugh and a consuming desire for revenge. The following day Sir Guy collapsed and died.

“The rest is a matter of historical record. Sir Guy had never married so he had no heirs. Lord Percy claimed the estate but never did anything about the land and buildings and, as was common in these parts, they fell into decay and the locals helped themselves to the masonry for use as building material. The foundations are still there I suppose but, to my knowledge, the site has never been considered important enough to be worth excavating.

“Anyway, Hugh wrote everything down and hid the account in the roof space expecting, no doubt, that it would eventually be found long after he and the hermit were dead and buried. And that’s what happened.”

I asked whether Hugh had confined himself to a straightforward narrative, or whether he had offered any logical explanation for these events

“Not really,” said the vicar. “The whole thing reads like the work of a man shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders through the whole account. He does say at the end, however, that he prays to God that no tree shall grow in the spot during his lifetime, so he must have believed that there was a connection between the twelve trees and the missing knights.”

It was a fascinating tale, told with enthusiasm and a fine recollection for detail by a skilled story teller. I thanked the vicar for his time, exchanged a few pleasantries and made my way home down the winding, treeless lane that ran to the sea. I took my usual evening stroll along the dunes, had dinner, and spent the evening trying to find something worth watching on the television. I gave up and spent the rest of the night before going to bed musing light-heartedly on the vicar’s tale of medieval magic and skulduggery. I half expected to dream about Hugh, Sir Guy and the wild hermit that night, but I didn’t. That was to come another night, a good six months later.

Why that night? I don’t know. Was it some sort of anniversary? Were the planets in the same configuration as they had been on that day in 1284 when the trees had, apparently, magically appeared in the churchyard?

I had been to Warkworth by then and seen a cave on the far side of the river from the path that runs upstream from Warkworth Castle. I had discovered that it was still called “the hermitage” and wondered whether it was where Hugh had conducted the fateful interview.

But I hadn’t been near the place in months. So why that night? Whatever the reason, I had the most vivid and realistic dream of my life. At least, that’s what the sceptic would believe it to be. I’m sure that it was far more than just a dream. Whatever it was, the memory of it now is as strong as ever and it is causing me to face an agonising decision, the like of which I wouldn’t wish on anybody.

It was late in the year. Christmas was in the air and I had watched an adaptation of an M.R. James ghost story on the television. Perhaps that’s why the dream came that night. I’m clutching at straws. This dream wasn’t the usual fitful, disjointed affair populated by gypsy children, haunted ash trees and runic curses. This one was rational, sharp as a razor and very frightening. This is what I “dreamed.”

I was standing in the field just a dozen or so yards downhill from

the two groups of poplar trees. I saw that the moon was full and every detail of the scene was clearly visible. I had a strong sense of really being there, in real time. I was aware of having gone to bed as usual and felt surprised at suddenly finding myself in a frosty landscape, hearing the wind in the trees and feeling its cold breath on my body.

I felt confused. My gaze wandered restlessly along the line of the twelve trees. I felt a sense of expectation without knowing why. Suddenly they started to glow. “Glow” isn’t quite the right word, but I don’t really know what is. They took on a sort of luminescence which caused me to blink several times, attempting to clear what I assumed was some visual aberration.

The trunk of each tree cracked and opened, and out of each one stepped a figure— a female figure, naked and hairless apart from long, dark cranial hair blowing listlessly in the light breeze. Their bodies were pure white, as though they had never seen the warm light of the sun. Each was slightly different to the others, but alike enough that they might have been sisters—rather like twelve examples of the same species of tree. I remembered Orpheus’ first meeting with his beloved Euridyce and how her beauty had led him to follow her to the very depths of Hades. Was that what I was seeing, the tree nymphs of classical legend?

They started to walk in my direction but I saw that their gaze was directed beyond me. I turned and saw a man walking up the hill. I didn’t recognise him but I saw that he was aware of the women. He came to within a few yards of me but was obviously unaware of my presence. He only had eyes for these naked beauties who were forming a tight circle around him.

The man was young—no more than thirty in my estimation—and dressed in modern clothes. He had a shotgun in his hand, which might explain why he was in the field and not in the lane on the other side of the hedge. Perhaps he was a farmer’s son, out shooting rabbits. I had no idea. I’d never seen him before.

But I saw him now. I saw the look in his eyes, a mixture of amazement and expectation as the women surrounded him. One of them moved close in front of him and pulled him gently to his knees. He looked around at the others and smirked childishly. He was clearly enthralled and in no condition to see anything beyond their naked bodies full of erotic promise. The woman removed his coat, then his sweater, then his shirt. I stared in amazement until a movement caught my eye and I swung around to look again in the direction of the

poplars. Twelve very different figures were striding purposefully towards us.

I recognised them from countless pictures I had seen in books: medieval knights in mail and surcoats, each with a bold red cross on the chest. They looked tough and imposing as they marched, twelve abreast, down the shallow slope. As they drew closer I saw their faces, lined and weather-worn, with the ravening look of wild animals in their eyes. Those eyes were terrible: hard, cruel, devoid of humanity—the eyes of a pack of wild dogs closing for the kill.

I felt gripped with fear, but fascinated at the same time. I could see them as clearly as I see my own hand now, but I was still struggling to decide whether it was a dream or not. Could they see me? The thought sent a shockwave of panic down my spine. My question was soon answered. As they passed close by, the nearest turned and looked directly at me. He said nothing but his intense stare made words unnecessary. “Keep out of this,” it said. “Don’t interfere.” The instruction was redundant. I was held rigid; there was no question of interfering.

As the men approached the poor wretch on his knees, the forms of the women became indistinct until they were mere wisps of vapour which floated swiftly back to the trees. Having watched their retirement, I turned back towards the half-naked man still kneeling on the frosty grass. His eyes carried a different sort of expectancy now; they held a level of terror that most of us, thankfully, never have to experience.

Two of the knights moved swiftly and took hold of his arms. A third placed one dark, leathery hand over his mouth and the other at the back of his neck, stifling the man’s pitiful protestations. I looked at the shotgun that lay on the grass where he had dropped it. It was too late to hope that it might be used in his defence. He was held firmly by three men to whom brutality was obviously second nature. I was certain that it would have been useless anyway.

They dragged him roughly up the slope towards the line of poplars. All but one of the other knights rushed to the spot in the centre of the trees and began to scratch away the earth with their bare hands. The remaining knight stood close by and removed a vicious-looking dagger from a scabbard on his belt. The victim was laid on his back, struggling wildly but held firm by his captors. The dagger was plunged into his chest and dragged downwards to open a cavity. The knight thrust his hand inside and wrenched out a bloody, steaming mass which he

looked at triumphantly for a few seconds before throwing it unceremoniously into the newly-dug hole. The others scraped the earth back into place—and they were gone.

There was silence. The suddenness of their disappearance stunned me. I had been both enraptured and appalled by the scene that had been played out before my eyes. But now there was only an eerie stillness, nothing else—or almost nothing. A body lay contorted on the frosty ground, its head thankfully turned away from me. I dread to think what a look must have been in its dead eyes.

I awoke in my own bed in my own bedroom. Blue sky filled the window and I arose to look out on a clear day and a frosty landscape. Some dreams we disregard as soon as we wake up. Others persist and nag at us for hours or even days. This one did more than nag. It was too real, and I felt sickened and shaken. At that point, however, I still chose to regard it as just a dream.

I didn’t go out that day, not even for my customary walks on the dunes. The dream hung about me like a heavy weight and my thoughts returned to it repeatedly. I couldn’t shake off the sense that I had really been in that field and really witnessed those horrific scenes. I felt uneasy at the prospect of going through the door. I didn’t exactly expect to see a sword-wielding maniac intent on my destruction, but the sense of horror was still strong enough to keep me erring on the cautious side.

By eight o’clock, however, I was feeling restive. It wasn’t like me to stay cooped up in the house all day. I decided to pay a visit to my nearest neighbours, a middle-aged couple who lived in another ex-farmhouse a quarter of a mile up the lane.

Fred Coulton was a local man who had built up a small building business, and his wife Wendy was an affable sort who came from Newcastle. She liked to regale me with tales of life as a “proper Geordie” when she was a girl. They had befriended me shortly after I had moved in and were more than happy for me to pop around every so often. They liked me to tell them what I had learned about their county from my researches as a photographer, and I needed an occasional break from the emotional austerity of living alone and doing a solitary job.

That night I wanted to tell them about the dream. I felt the need to tell *somebody*, and they were the only friends I had made during my short spell in the North East. But I hesitated. I hadn’t told them the story of Hugh and the hermit as I had felt that it was somehow

confidential, even though the vicar hadn't expressly said so. To relate the dream would have meant telling the whole story from the beginning and I just wasn't in the mood for talking at length. I had, however, told them the story of the twelve trees shortly after I had met them, during one of our chats about the oddities of the county. Fred was about to use it to thrust a sharpened lance through my self-imposed wall of silence.

Our conversation wasn't flowing easily and I'm sure they could tell that my mood was guarded and distant. After one of several uneasy lulls, Fred suddenly took on the air of a man who had thought of something to say to break the clammy silence. He looked at me and said, "Oh, I know what you might find interesting."

If words can have a power that is verging on the palpable, these were at the top of the league.

"You know that spot in the churchyard that you told us about once, the one between the trees where nothing grows? They found a body there this morning."

My chest felt as though it had been struck by something heavy. My heart began to thump and the back of my neck turned cold and prickly.

"A body?"

"Mmm. Graham Ferrers it was, Arnold's son; owns the farm down the road behind the dunes. Only twenty eight. The postman saw him lying there when he went to collect the mail from the box. Police were there for a couple of hours apparently."

"What did he die of?" I asked foolishly, my sense of shock sidestepping the obvious fact that the cause would probably not be public knowledge yet.

"Don't know," said Fred. "Some of the old lads from the village stood around the whole time and said they couldn't see any marks or blood or anything. They heard one of the coppers say it must have been a heart attack. Can you believe it? Twenty eight! Makes you think you're living on borrowed time."

I think Fred expected this revelation to start the conversation moving but it didn't. Looking back on it now, I feel that I should have been full of questions, pressing him for more information. But the workings of the human brain are often at odds with what you later think they should have been, and the effect of this startling bit of news only made me more guarded. The conversation lapsed again and I went home earlier than usual.

I really didn't want to go to bed that night. The details of the two

dramas were too coincidental for comfort. And the similarity in names hadn't escaped me. Surely the medieval "de Ferrer" would have evolved into the modern "Ferrers." Could there be a family connection going back to Hugh? Was the revenge motive part of this sordid picture? I became intensely conscious of the fact that I was a witness—the only witness. But that wouldn't matter to supernatural beings, would it? Or would it? I didn't know. My thinking was muddled, unfocused. Fear has that effect. If it did matter to them, I didn't fancy meeting them in another dream.

And so I sat in my armchair, pondering uncomfortably on the meaning of such transparent synchronicity. I drank a lot of Scotch which had a mercifully numbing effect on my agitation. At about four in the morning I went to bed.

I woke up late with a bit of a headache but a sizeable sense of relief. No nocturnal sojourns—or at least none that I remembered, and that would do. I felt better, more logical. I decided that I probably wasn't in any danger, that the whole thing might just be an almighty coincidence and there was nothing I could do about it anyway.

For the next few weeks I busied myself with the task of trying to get work from book and magazine publishers. A sharp recession was hitting the publishing industry and my regulars were putting out hardly any new commissions. I wasn't having much luck and I was beginning to get depressed. I could see the end of my career looming and the dream went very much to the back of my mind.

Then Fred Coulton showed me a local newspaper that carried an article on the coroner's inquest into the death of Graham Ferrers. Briefly, it said that he had been found at the eastern edge of the churchyard, that he was stripped to the waist and that a shotgun and some discarded clothing had been found a little way down the hill. His father confirmed that he had gone out that night to try to find and shoot a fox that had been troubling the hen sheds. The cause of death was cardiac arrest caused by an embolism. The obvious conclusion was that he had dropped the gun when the attack occurred—I remember thinking that the use of the word "attack" was unwittingly ironic—and it was assumed that he had struggled up the slope in an attempt to reach the village, but had died before he got there. No explanation was offered as to why he had removed his upper garments, but there was no reason to pursue the matter. The verdict was a formality.

I had to let this go; what else could I do? And I had my business to worry about. Spring, normally the start of my busy period, came and

went with only a couple of half-day commissions that paid just about enough for one month's rent. My capital was draining away. Summer was completely dead and, by the middle of July, I was forced to join the ranks of the unemployed.

Life became tedious. Your activities are pretty limited when you're living in such a remote spot and dependant entirely on a single person's benefit. Even putting enough petrol in the car to do the weekly shop is a burden when the nearest town is ten miles away.

I became an expert in shoestring living. Socialising was out of the question and I became totally reliant on Fred and Wendy for company. In the autumn a friend from back home offered me a way out. He had inherited a terraced house on the death of a relative and offered to let me use it for a nominal rent. I didn't have much choice but to accept and, in early December, I moved back to my home town in the Midlands.

Northumberland soon became a distant memory. My new environment couldn't have been further from the old. The wild and stark beauty of the east coast had been replaced by crumbling red brick, concrete and tarmac. The terraced houses were crammed together in a claustrophobic mass and the whole area was criss-crossed by streets that were too narrow for the lines of cars parked on both sides day and night. They only added to my sense of being closed in and dominated by the inert paraphernalia of urban life. There were no trees in this mortified environment, and the only wild flowers were the weeds that grew out of the gaps between the house walls and the paving slabs. The noise of people, internal combustion engines and hooting horns punctuated the brief silences all day long and for much of the night as well.

My only contact with Northumberland was the occasional phone call from Fred and Wendy. I was glad when they rang. If they didn't ring me for a couple of months I would ring them, even though I couldn't really afford it.

All the time they were speaking I would strain to listen for noises in the background, hoping I would pick up the rumble and hiss of the waves at high tide, or the infamous wind coming off the sea, or maybe catch the hoot of an owl somewhere close outside their window. They kept me in touch with a world that was open and airy and populated by the children of nature, living and dying by the cycles of the seasons. I really was glad of their calls—until yesterday. Now I wish they had let me go and forgotten that they had ever known me.

Yesterday I had a phone call from Fred. I was glad to hear from him as usual, until he told me his latest piece of news.

He thought I might be interested to know that there was a tree growing in the churchyard, in that bare spot between the two lines of poplars close to where Arnold Ferrers' lad was found dead. We talked about it when I lived there, remember? I shuddered slightly. The nightmare was back, alive and kicking.

"I suppose," he said with that gentle, Northumbrian lilt that makes everything sound so matter-of-fact, "somebody's planted it in memory of Graham. His parents probably."

Perhaps they had. Or perhaps there's a more disturbing explanation known only to me, the only witness. A game of revenge and resurrection played at some propitious moment by the souls of a dark alliance kept in enforced separation for seven hundred years. Fountain-head and acolytes reunited; the distant descendant of their tormentor being sacrificed to reverse the act of his forefather. Do I really believe this? I'm afraid I do. I had the "dream." Only I know what it was like to be there that night.

So what do I do about it? Make the trip to Northumberland and cut the sapling off at ground level? I've seen the men responsible for its genesis and I shudder at the thought of meeting them again. Maybe I'm wrong and somebody has planted it there, in memoriam, in which case I would be nothing more than a common vandal.

But I don't think I am wrong, so how do I reconcile my firmly held belief with the prospect of taking no action? How would I live with myself if one of the village children disappeared?

The fact that my belief could be totally fanciful should make it easy for me to take the soft option and ignore the whole thing. I'm not made that way. I'm cursed with a strong sense of personal responsibility. The same objection applies to the other obvious option—sit back and hope the vicar will do the job.

I've been sitting here all day wondering how the evil energy contained within thirteen trees could translate itself into physical action. I don't see how it could; but I'm not an expert in such matters, so I can't be sure. Whatever the mechanics of the matter, the fact is established and cannot be ignored: the twelve trees have now been joined by a thirteenth.

The arguments go back and forth, back and forth, like the pendulum of a grandfather clock ticking me down to one form of doom or another. Which do I take, the devil or the deep blue sea? The decision

needs to be made now. The power might not be unleashed until the thirteenth tree is fully-grown, but the bigger it gets the more impracticable it will be to do anything about it.

In the meantime I have felt it necessary to spend a few hours setting all this down for the record. If I do decide to back up my convictions with some courage, I'll need to move quickly before my resolve cools. There won't be time for writing then.

If something untoward should happen to me during the attempt, my story will be of no interest to the police or the pathologist and will be quite inadmissible in a coroner's court. But at least my friends will, if they feel so inclined, be able to interpret the circumstances of my misfortune in a more informed light. They might even feel moved to complete the job on my behalf. In all conscience, it is something I could not ask of them. ●



Horror's # 1 Community on the web

Communicate directly with some of dark fiction's best know authors via personal message boards.

Reviews of the latest horror book releases - Original fiction by the genre's biggest names. Up to the minute news and announcements

www.horrorworld.org

UNNATURAL BLONDE

Rob Brooks

John saw a dirt cloud heading towards him—the first sign of life on this deserted dirt road in over half an hour. He looked at Lynn, asleep in the passenger seat. He'd already been going the wrong way when she drifted off, although she hadn't known it. With any luck, he'd get out of this wilderness before she woke up.

Leading the dust cloud was a panel truck. He thought about rolling down his window and trying to stop it as it passed by, but that meant waking up Lynn. Besides, he'd be through all this shortly, as long as he kept driving in the right direction.

The truck slowed anyway, not to a stop, but enough so that the driver could get a long look at John and Lynn. He was a disgusting man, fat-lipped and squinty-eyed. His mouth curled into a sneering smile when the Martins got window to window with him.

John shivered and was past him. He looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the truck disappear into the dust. The back of the white truck read "Mueller Dairy." So at least there was some kind of life out here.

He tried his cell phone again, but couldn't get a signal. Hadn't gotten one since the pavement ran out.

A few minutes after he passed the dairy truck, John finally got lucky. As he breached a hill and looked down into a little valley, he saw a town—not very large, but a town nonetheless. He saw a diner—Jerome's, the sign read. It would be John's first, and hopefully only, stop.

Lynn finally stirred. She sat up, stretched, and looked out the window. "Where are we, John?" she asked with a yawn.

"Just making a little stop, honey."

"Looks like we're in the middle of nowhere," she said. She looked down at the road. "Is that dirt?"

"I just need to stop up here and use the bathroom," John said, wishing she'd slept just a few minutes longer.

Their Taurus rolled into town, and they got their first glimpse at the

natives. John realized they must be in the most backward part of Indiana.

"Not exactly a beauty pageant, is it?" Lynn asked, mirroring his thoughts.

No, it wasn't. Farthest thing from it. The people were horrible to look at, like the man from the dairy truck. There, a young woman with pointed ears, her body misshapen. A boy with more hair than any adolescent should have, bouncing a basketball near the street. An old man with one deformed hand, the fingers all short and stubby, seemingly a knuckle short.

"What is this place, John?" Lynn asked her husband, sliding a little closer to him.

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. Inbreeding, maybe. Sometimes, these little towns out here get stranded from the rest of society. There might just not be enough fresh blood to go around."

Her hands on his arm, Lynn shivered. "I don't like it. Look at the way everyone is staring at us."

Everyone had stopped, paused in whatever activities they were doing. Pointy-Eared Girl stood on the porch of a general store, slack-jawed and gawking. Hairly Boy let his basketball roll into the road, where John had to steer around it. Gimp Hand wasn't doing much but sitting in his rocker, but he kept one squinty eye on the shiny new car driving into town.

John pulled up in front of Jerome's diner. "I'm just going to run in," he said. "Why don't you just sit tight?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I think I will. I don't want to get out here."

John slid out of the car and slammed the door. Leaning back in the window, he said, "Be back in a minute."

He still just couldn't tell her he was lost. A real man couldn't get so lost, and wouldn't be shamed in front of his own wife anymore.

The bell tinkled over the door as he walked into the diner. The place was dingy and dark, and seemed more like a tavern than a diner, especially without any windows.

John stopped as the door swung shut just behind him. The patrons in the seedy restaurant all stopped talking and looked in his direction. He couldn't get a good look at any of them, but the room smelled like a barn at the end of a hot, wet day.

Waving at everyone, John made his way to the counter in the back. Conversation gradually picked up again, and although people still glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes, they weren't openly

staring anymore.

John sat down at the counter and tapped his fingers. A waitress quickly came his way.

The waitress, at least, was an average-looking person. No obvious deformities, anyway. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked quietly.

He read her nametag. "Haley, I'm a little lost," John said.

She gave a little smile. "I gathered that. We don't get many tourists on purpose. Not many at all. Although that's how my mama found this town—just passing through, but she ended up staying on."

John nodded as if he completely understood and cared deeply. "Well, maybe I could get some directions back to the highway."

She looked up a moment, sucking on her lip as she thought. "No," she eventually said, "I wouldn't know how to get anywhere from here. Ain't never left town. But I might be able to find someone who can help."

Haley started to turn away, but John spoke up to stop her. "What town is this, anyway?" he asked.

"Why, this is Mueller Rudge," she replied with a smile. Her teeth were perfect, and John realized that she was a very attractive girl. He couldn't believe she worked in a rundown shack in this hayseed town.

She turned away to get the directions for John, and he nearly gagged. He had to put a hand over his mouth to keep quiet.

Haley's hair swung to the side, and as it did, John caught sight of just a few inches of her back. Running from her hairline down into the back of her dress was a layer of thick, tough skin. Looked like scales or a shell of some sort.

Then she was gone into the kitchen, and John's heart rate slowly came down. There was something seriously wrong in this town. He just wanted to get the directions and get out as soon as he could.

John heard a honk, and realized it was Lynn. He looked for Haley, who wasn't back yet, then crossed to the door and leaned out. Lynn sat in the driver's seat of the car, the windows rolled up. She looked worried. Several of Mueller Rudge's finest citizens surrounded the car, staring in as if *she* were the sideshow. John saw Pointy-Eared Girl and Hairly Boy among the crowd.

He signaled to her, letting her know he'd be right out, and turned back to the counter.

Haley had returned with a big greasy man, who was wiping his hands on his apron. In the light from the kitchen I could see that he had a mouth full of pointed teeth. His nametag read *Pete*. "Lost, huh?" he

said. "Why don't you just stick around a few days? We've got some nice sights. Got one of the top dairy farms in the state."

Haley smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure it's a nice farm," John said slowly. "But my wife and I are just trying to get to Indianapolis, and we're kind of in a hurry."

"Indy-naplis, huh?" Pete said. "Well, I don't know how you'd get there. You should check over at Luke's store, though. They got maps and such."

"Thanks," John said. He turned and headed for the door, noticing all conversation had ceased again.

He stepped outside, took a deep breath of fresh air, and jogged down to the car. The crowd had grown. "Excuse me," he said, trying to push through. No one moved, so he shouted, "Excuse me!"

He finally made it to the driver's door and Lynn looked out at him, tears in her eyes. "Johnny!" he heard her cry through the door.

She unlocked the car and he slid in. "What are we doing here, John?" Lynn asked, and threw her arms around him.

He sighed, feeling anger towards his wife. Always trying to be the boss. "We're lost," he said. "But we're going now. We'll get directions somewhere else."

"No, we can't," she said, and sobbed.

"What do you mean?"

"One of the little ones went under the car. I think he did something to it."

"What?" John put the key into the ignition and turned it. Nothing happened. This was incredible. What was the matter with these people?

"I'll handle this." Doing his best to act the man, totally in charge. He stepped out of the car and closed the door. Lynn quickly locked it.

"Did one of you break my car?" he asked. The crowd engulfed him, and he felt myself drifting away from the car.

No one spoke. He asked again. Still no answer. John was constantly moving, drifting, riding the crowd. All those freakish faces stared back at him.

Finally, he came to a stop, facing Pointy-Eared Girl. He could still see the tips of those ears peeking out through her blonde hair. She smiled and stepped towards him. "If there's something wrong with your car, maybe you all should just stay here. Got a motel up the road, and a garage." She smiled really big. "Lots of folks find they like the town once they spend some time here. Got a dairy you can visit."

He took a step back, only to bump into another member of the crowd. John looked at Pointy-Eared Girl. "We really need to get going," he said. "Where can I find the mechanic?"

She stepped in even closer, and as he got a better look at her, John was trying not to throw up. Her hair was patchy, and he could see that in the holes where the hair was missing was some of that same scale-like skin that Haley had on her back. She was wearing a thin dress buttoned up the front, and beneath it her body seemed to be grossly misshapen. Her bare feet were black and spotted, as if they were sick.

She leaned against him. The odd bulges on her body were sliding back and forth against him, and he was gagging. They felt like tumors, hanging down from her chest. And then her breasts rubbed against him, and his stomach dropped as a thought came to him.

"You might find something you really like here," she said. "Maybe me. I'm Jackie."

John pulled back a bit and looked, and now that he knew what he was looking at, he could see it plainly—she had a second pair of breasts.

His breath started coming in gasps.

"You look like a big strong man." She put her hand on his chest. "We could use someone like you here."

He didn't listen to anymore. He spun around until he spotted the car, then dove for it through the mass of bodies. He pulled the driver's door open and yelled at Lynn, "Get out! We're going!"

Lynn looked bewildered, but opened her door. John ran around the car and pulled her out. "Just run," he said. "Run."

He expected the crowd to follow them, but they just stood and watched them go. Maybe they knew there was nowhere to go.

John ran, holding Lynn's hand, practically dragging her after him. "John!" she yelled. "Johnny! What's going on?"

They rounded a corner and were out of the eyes of that crowd. He stopped to catch his breath. "There is something wrong here," he said. "These people aren't right. I think they're trying to keep us here. We've got to find a working car and go."

"Steal a car? What are you talking about?"

"They broke ours, we'll steal one of theirs. Besides, I doubt these people will call the police."

They jogged down the street, a residential area. John looked in each driveway and open garage they passed. "I don't see any cars. Where

are they all?"

"Maybe they don't have any," Lynn said. She was crying now. "They probably don't leave town too much."

John realized she had a good point. Like Haley, many of these people may have never left this town before. Maybe never would.

They heard a noise behind them. John turned and saw the crowd at the head of the street. Jackie, Pointy-Eared Girl, was at the front, still smiling. "Come back, Muscles," she shouted. "It's my time. You'll like it here in Mueller Rudge."

John looked around and grabbed Lynn's arm. "This way." *He* would get them out of this place, one way or another. They ran down a cross street with a handmade sign that read Meerkin Road. They ran past several houses, then saw one with an open front door. "Up there!"

They ran up the short sidewalk and into the house. The place was small, sparsely decorated, dirty. No one seemed to be there. John and Lynn crouched down beneath one of the windows, peeking out. "We'll hide out here for a few minutes, let them go by, then see if we can just get out into the woods. We'll walk out of town if we have to."

"What does that woman want, John?"

"I don't know. But she was coming on to me out there. But she's... wrong, somehow. I think she has four breasts."

Lynn's face went from confused to horrified. "When that little hairy boy was looking into the car, I could see into his mouth. His tongue looked forked."

A voice came from behind them and they both jumped, Lynn squealing a bit before John clamped his hand down over her mouth. "They're not natural," the voice said.

John spun and saw a woman. She'd walked into the room and was standing in the doorway, looking at them with apathetic eyes. She didn't seem to be deformed in any way, but John hadn't forgotten how he was fooled by Haley's looks.

"They're not natural," she repeated, "but they're not so bad." She walked to a wooden chair and sat down.

John crawled over to her, keeping below the window. "Can you help us get out here?"

She looked down at him, her eyes hollow, emotionless. "There's no way out," she said. Lynn started to cry more. "I've been here over twenty years. Just passing through, but I'm still here."

The woman was just a shell, John realized, a shadow of whatever she had once been. He looked around the room again, and spotted one

picture on the mantle. It was this woman, with her arm around the waitress, Haley. The woman was smiling wide, but John could tell it was faked.

"What if we just run out through the woods?" John asked. "What's the quickest way to get there, and stay out of sight? You could come with us."

She shook her head. "Can't do it. There's things in the woods. Unnatural things."

"You keep saying 'unnatural,'" John said. "What do you mean? How are the people unnatural? We've noticed that some of them look strange."

"They're just unnatural," she said. "They won't tell me. Even after all these years. But I think if you go back far enough, not all of their ancestors were human."

John shivered. He'd had that feeling, just looking at their faces and bodies.

"The things in the woods are some kind of animals, but none like you've ever seen before. Too many legs and teeth. But they'll kill you before you get three steps into the woods."

John sat quietly as he watched the crowd go by the front of the house. They didn't even look towards the hiding spot. Apparently these people had inbred so long that in addition to the physical deformities, they weren't very smart.

When they were past, he turned back to the woman. "No cars? Trucks?"

"No."

"How do these people live?"

"They don't tell me. I just do my job and they stay away from me."

"Your job? What's your job?"

She looked at him, as if he were dumb for not understanding. "The same thing they want you for. They need fresh blood. I'm a breeder."

The woman, Marla, let them stay for about an hour. As they moved around the house in that time, John looked for anything he could use for a weapon. He eventually settled on a kitchen knife, sliding it into his waistband on the side of his leg.

All John had wanted was a little trip to try to be the big shot for once for his wife. Go to the city, show her around, she could meet his new business partners, and for once she wouldn't be the one providing for them. For once, he would be in charge.

Right now he felt he wasn't in charge of anything. When they finally decided to leave, John only had one idea about where to go, and he asked Marla, "Where's this dairy farm they all talk about?"

Finally, an emotion crossed Marla's face. Her eyes opened wide and the corners of her mouth sagged. "You don't want to go there," she said.

"Why not?" Lynn asked. She hadn't stopped crying.

Marla wouldn't say, but she did tell them how to get there when John kept pressing. It was only a few blocks down on the street they'd been on before turning onto Meerkin Road.

"Thanks, Marla," John said as he and Lynn crept out the front door. "We'll send help when we get out."

"If you get out, you'll probably never find your way back." Then she turned and headed for another room without another word.

The streets were quiet as they jogged through the shadows. "Why do you want to go to the farm?" Lynn asked. "She said it was terrible."

"Because the farm might be this town's only source of income. They've got to have vehicles there. On the way into town I saw a truck leaving. It was from the dairy. If they've got another truck, we can leave, and they won't be able to catch up to us."

They reached the farm, and it seemed to be quiet. There weren't even any animals around. Didn't seem like much of a farm.

John spotted a huge barn, and at one of the large double doors was a truck, identical to the one he'd seen leaving town earlier. "There's one!" Lynn squealed. She laughed. John realized she was nearly hysterical.

"There's another." He pointed to the far end of the barn, where the nose of another truck was just peeking out. "We've got to disable it so they can't follow us."

They ran to the closer truck as quietly as they could. John opened the door and helped Lynn up. "Let's just go," she said. "No one's around, they'll never catch us."

He shook his head and checked the ignition. The keys were there. "Can't take the chance. You stay here. I'm going to let the air out of their tires. If I can't make it back, you go. Go get help and come back for me."

"I'm not leaving without you, John," she whispered. "Let's just go."

"Not yet." He pointed back through town. "That's the way we came. If something happens, you start this thing and go that way. Run

over anything in your way. Just drive until you get a phone signal, then call the police."

She leaned down and kissed him. "I love you, John. Just hurry up."

"Okay."

He pulled out the kitchen knife that he'd taken from Marla and kept close to the building as he moved. He had to cross the wide-open door to get to the other truck. He waited at the doorframe, looked back to see Lynn staring at him in the side mirror of the truck. He took a deep breath, then sprinted the rest of the way to the second truck.

John heard sounds as he passed the doors—sounds of machines, animals, and men. He paused a moment, making sure no one had noticed him, then bent down by the front tire of the truck and stabbed his knife in. There was a loud pop and hiss as the air rushed out.

"What was that?"

Someone inside had heard. John pulled the knife out of the rubber and ran to the back tire, stabbing that one as well. He looked up and saw a man walk out of the barn, closely followed by another.

The man looked around, then his eyes caught sight of John. The farmer took a deep breath and yelled, "He's here!" The noise was incredibly loud, louder than a normal man's voice should be.

The man charged towards John, who ran around the back of the truck. John thrust his knife into another tire as he looked up at the Lynn. "Go!" he yelled, waving his arm. "Go!"

John was tackled from behind as he heard Lynn's truck start up. He rolled onto the ground, trying to maintain his grip on the knife and losing. He was flipped over onto his back, and he looked up into the face of a monster, a monster wearing bib overalls and a straw hat. The farmer's pig nose had whiskers extending from it, but the tusks stretching out of his mouth were more than John could take.

He lashed out with all his strength and pushed the creature off of him. The pigman stumbled back where he was caught by his fellow farmer, and they both charged.

John looked towards Lynn, and her truck wasn't going anywhere yet. Another look around and he spotted the herd of Mueller Rudge denizens stampeding towards him.

As the farmers rushed him, John decided he had to keep their attention. This was his chance to show his wife what he was made of, his chance to take care of her. Maybe his last chance. "Just go!" he shouted to his wife. "Come back for me!" And he ran around the farmers into the barn.

He heard the truck shift gears and start moving. John found an empty stall and looked out a window. The pigman and his partner were chasing Lynn, but there was no way they would catch her. Lynn drove straight towards the crowd of people and before most of them could react, she was driving through the middle of them. Some dove out of the way, but he saw the way the truck jumped as it rolled over several bodies.

John was alone. He realized for the first time that he was in the place that Marla feared so much. He stepped out into the middle of the building, listening to the sounds of machines. He stepped over one stall and looked in.

Nothing but a cow, an electronic milking machine hooked up to her udders.

He walked back further, passing more cows. Then he walked around a corner in the back of the barn.

He looked into the nearest stall and stopped. The creature wasn't a cow.

It was a woman.

She had the same vacant look that Marla had. She sat on the floor in the hay, and John saw the shackles restraining her. Her eyes didn't register him at all.

She was bare from the waist up. She was being milked by a machine similar to the ones attached to the cows.

John wanted to scream but didn't dare open his mouth. He looked into the next stall and saw another woman. In the third was a young woman with eyes that were alive, alive and wild. She was gagged, and being restrained more tightly than the others. She grunted and groaned, her eyes pleading to John to help her.

The barn doors slammed shut. He was out of sight of them, and scurried around the back stalls until he found an unoccupied one.

When the voice called out, his heart sunk as he recognized it. "Come one out, Muscles," Jackie the Pointy-Eared, Four-Breasted Girl called out. "There's nowhere to hide."

Indeed there wasn't. John looked around for a place to hide, or for something he could use as a weapon, but there were no options. He listened to the footsteps grow closer, until Jackie finally stepped into view.

John scooted as far back into the stall as he could go. She smiled at him. "She got away," Jackie said. "Hurt some people in the process. But we don't need her. As you can see, we've got plenty of women right

now."

Through his terror, he still felt some relief. Lynn had escaped. He'd saved her. "She'll be back, with the police," John said. "Let me go right now."

She chuckled. "Funny thing about Mueller Rudge—it's hard to find. Our own dairymen have to follow a trail to get back here when they leave. You're on your own now, Muscles."

Her hand moved and she started undoing the buttons down the front of her dress. "It's just you and me."

She undid the last button and the dress fell back off her shoulders. John couldn't look away from her naked, disgusting, unnatural body. Jackie licked her lips as she walked towards him across the sweet-smelling hay.

John screamed, and although he fought, he was soon chained in his own stall, helpless and needy once again. ●



Have your favorite movies gone down the memory hole?

Even with so many classic movies now available on DVD, there are still countless cult favorites languishing on out-of-print VHS. Some have never been released at all! But at

**TACHYON CITY
RETRO-FUTURISTIC
CINEMA**

these almost-forgotten classics can be yours -- for FREE!

www.tachyon-city.com

THE OLD HOUSE

Nandi Ekles

The old house sits back off the road on its own little acre of land, a field of overgrown weeds, thistles, and scrub; it sits there doing nothing, but it taunts me. The gray hulk looks as ancient as I feel, a monument to the history it holds. From where I stand on the road, the weathered gray looks almost black in the sunlight. The house stands alone on this road, but there were neighbors—once.

As I look at the house, dreading what must take place, my mind goes back in time. The sunburned gray wood of the siding becomes gleaming white showing the sparkling promise of the future. The shutters and screen door are painted a rich blue, the color of peace. I see Benjamin Vaughn, the young owner of the house, standing on the road, watching as the builders put the finishing touches of white on the wood. His thoughts are strong in the air, imagining the beautiful woman he will soon possess. He shouts to the workers in a harsh voice that his bride, the beautiful Corrine, must be absolutely thrilled with his house. His house must match her beauty board for board, no imperfections whatsoever. I shudder as I listen to his egotistical tirade.

In the midst of the ancient activity to finish the construction, the yard also transforms itself into a carpet of green; its beds of ivy and roses encircling the house. In the middle of the yard, the withered oak tree greens and straightens, crying out for lovers to picnic beneath it and children to play in its branches. The smell of the grass and flowers returns to me and erases the dryness of decay. Young Benjamin breathes in the perfumes and is satisfied with his new home.

I am propelled forward a few weeks and I watch Benjamin carrying his bride up the pathway. The second floor window is open and blue curtains flap as if welcoming, waving to them. The white lace of Corrine's gown is in sharp contrast to the deep black of Benjamin's suit. Her face shines with bliss, but his is set in determination and triumph, as if he has won a prize. As I watch them disappear into the house, reality returns. Oh, God, have I not been through this enough! I have

watched this over and over through the years and always beg for my grave at the end of the day.

I walk up the path through the yard, grass and scrub crunching beneath my feet. I struggle in the heat of the day as the sun beats down on me in relentless punishment. I falter in the heat, but no relief comes. I know I must make this walk.

Reaching the porch, I notice the posts have begun to lean out toward the yard. It won't be long before they give way altogether and allow the roof to meet the ground. Rocking chairs on either side of the door dutifully wait for their owners to sit in the evening breeze and watch their children play in the yard and climb the oak tree. The chairs were once privy to plans for the future as Benjamin sat with Corrine and enjoyed his yard, breathing the scents of roses and grass while watching the misty rain of a summer afternoon. Benjamin is sitting there now, close to the door, enjoying a fine cigar, still dressed in his wedding suit while Corrine is inside preparing herself for his embrace. His face shines with pride in anticipation of claiming her as his possession. He rocks in the chair with his head held high.

My hand reaches for the screen and feels the splintering of the rotting wood. How I hate to enter, but I carry on. The door opens into the front room where the sun shines hatefully through the dirt-streaked window and moth-eaten draperies, magnifying dust particles in the air. The stained wallpaper peels in spots while the furniture rots away, gaping with holes where rodents have burrowed for shelter from the weather. The ancient grandfather clock continues standing against the east wall, its pendulum halted for eternity. A small skeleton, perhaps a mouse, lies scattered across the floor. I hear in my head the ghostly echoes of the old nursery rhyme of "Hickory Dickory Dock," a mockery of the past, as if children had actually lived here to sing and play. Cobwebs drape the corners of the ceiling, a macabre veil covering the odors of dry animal dung and dust that fills my nose.

My heart sinks as I view the waste and remember the beauty and comfort of this room. I can see the wallpaper, white with stripes of tiny flower bouquets, gleaming in the sunlight. The holes in the couch heal themselves and the dust and dirt dissolve to reveal lush, blue upholstery. The cobwebs vanish and the floorboards shine with the luster of care. The clock pendulum rocks back and forth, and I hear the seconds ticking by. How I wish I could stop that ticking and suspend this moment in time. This room should be remembered this way. The curtains over the window are tied back and the glass is raised so that

I hear the creaks as young Benjamin rocks on the porch. I close my eyes and smell cigar smoke mixed with roses. His arrogance and pride grieve me. I hear his bride's voice from upstairs calling that she is ready for him. Through the open window, I see him smile, rise, extinguish his cigar, and go to meet her.

The scene fades. Once again I am back in the rotting room, the stifling heat crushing me. Now I must climb the stairs, so I place my hand on the newel post. Above the staircase a piece of the roof has given way allowing the weather in to eat at the risers, and it will ultimately claim the entire house. I am relieved at that thought; when this house is gone, I will be free. But for now, I must go up.

I test each riser to see if my weight will be supported, listening for creaks that become screams. The velvety wood of the banister is covered with dirt, so I can't lean there for my support either. I must stay to the center, careful of the bits of fallen roof. As I reach the second floor landing, I look at the four doors flanking the hall. One leads to a toilet room, one to a guest bedroom, one to an empty nursery, and one to the master bedroom. This last is where I am headed. I put my hand on the crystal doorknob and twist. The door opens easily for me, as I knew it would.

The room before me is bright with sunlight and oppressive with heat. This room sits directly above the front room, and across from me is the window with the once waving curtains, now turned to rags. A bed with a wrought iron frame stands against the wall under the window; its mattress stained and full of holes, aged brown stuffing poking through and filled with mouse droppings. The wardrobe stands across from the bed, blackened with age, its wood melting together. Next to the door is a dressing table topped by a mirror; the silver backing has browned and begun to run drawing eerie stripes in the glass. The flocked paper on the walls is peeling and an odor of musk hangs in the air.

This was the room where the lovers slept. He claimed her and kept her here—she became his and he would never let her go—and he took from her physical delights. She slept with her head on his chest, trusting the safety in the strength of his arms; and his head moved to breathe the perfume of her hair. They lived in his world and that world was complete and closed. As he slept, he dreamed of the children they would one day have to complete the appearance.

I leave the phantom lovers locked in their embrace and softly close the door behind me. My next stop waits directly across the hall: the

nursery. Dear God, no! This is the room where the madness begins. The usual pain starts in my chest and my palm sweats as I reach for the door knob. The door swings open and I stare across the empty room through the window overlooking the backyard. An unused crib rests against the east wall, and, like the rest of the house, time and neglect have claimed it. The weight of dust has caused the bottom to fall to the floor.

My eyes sting with tears, I cross to the window to gaze at the yard, now more jungle than yard. I peer through the overgrowth and locate the line where the laundry hung to dry, soaking up sunshine and fresh air. I blink away my tears and watch Corrine, her belly rounded with the future, hanging her sheets. A man steps through the fence hedge; he speaks to her and she answers him and smiles. The air in the room changes and I realize Benjamin now stands behind me watching the scene in the yard. I can feel his madness electrifying the air as everything around me grows faint. I want to scream at him of the terrible waste that is looming, that his anger and jealousy are unjustified. But of course, I can't. He is a vision of the past and cannot hear me. I hear him whisper that she must be punished. She must learn that she belongs to him and no one else, and the man in the yard must never return.

I leave him standing there and turn and walk from the room. I have one more room to visit before my task is complete for another year. I turn with fear and mourning, ordering my heavy feet to move. The stairs wait for me.

On the bottom floor directly across from the landing, there is a hallway leading to the kitchen and dining area. After all these years, I should expect the scene of decay, but my breath catches at the waste. Something small skitters across the floor and I recoil. I know nothing can hurt me here, but my sense of revulsion is still strong.

There are windows on the west wall—they are a part of this story—and they admit the merciless sunlight. Standing in the doorway I can no longer hold back my grief and a sob escapes me. This is the room where the horror played out and tears stream down my face as I gather the courage to face what is to come. Here the nightmare will take place once again.

The curtains that once covered the grimy windows now lay on the floor; time has released them from their fixture. A small pine table surrounded by four chairs stands against the wall next to the doorway. A cook stove takes up the corner against the east wall, once gleaming

with white enamel, it is now covered with dirt and rust spots. The west wall holds the three windows, cabinets and a sink. Above the sink a window has been smashed, scattering broken glass across the bottom of the sink and onto the wooden floor. Twigs, leaves, dirt, and rocks litter all the surfaces. A few steps from the sink, a shapeless stain mars the floor, and a dirty, wadded piece of crochet rests against the wall.

I step into the room; one step is almost more than I can bear. This, Benjamin's favorite room, welcoming him home from work each day with its warm stove and delicious smells, is now the most dreadful room in the house. In his narrow little world where everything was so perfect, imperfection and horror were about to creep in and destroy him.

I look out the window and I see Benjamin coming in from a day of work at the bank in town. He is whistling and the sun is shining. Corrine, beautiful in spite of the fading bruise on her face in the shape of his hand, sits at the table, enjoying a cup of coffee in the sunshine, but she is not alone. The neighbor, Mr. Hadley, sits across from her, feasting on one of her pastries. The gleaming windows are open, and Benjamin hears the tinkle of her laughter as he walks up the path. His face darkens and I feel the jealousy emanating out from him like ocean waves. Clouds cover the sun with freakish speed, and the flowers bordering the walk seem to droop in sadness. He quickens his step to reach the house and disappears as he enters the front door. A moment later he enters the kitchen and the air freezes. Suddenly my head and chest feel as if they will burst.

Corrine looks up and introduces Mr. Hadley, stating that he came to bring a gift he thought she would find useful in her condition, and she points to the little crocheted rug on the floor in front of the sink. Mr. Hadley stands to shake hands with Benjamin, noting the darkness on his face. The tension is so thick a knife would stick fast in the air. Benjamin glares at the intruder and demands to know his intentions. Mr. Hadley's face pales and becomes blank with confusion. He begs the young man's pardon and leaves the room, Benjamin and Corrine facing each other. She drops her eyes from his, knowing what he is capable of. A barrage of verbal abuse and accusations pour from his lips as she tries to calm him. Trying to divert his attention, she turns to the sink and hands her husband a bowl of potatoes to wash and peel for dinner, then heads to the stove to tend to a different task.

I can see the madness in his face, the jealousy turn his skin shades of green. The memory of her sitting at a table with another man,

laughing and sipping coffee, causes his eyes to burn. She belongs to him, and he doesn't like to share his possessions. He turns to hurl another insult at her, accentuating the syllables of his own dark reason by stabbing the air with the knife he holds. She answers quietly with her eyes averted and hesitantly crosses the room to take the potatoes from him.

"Stop! Don't move from the stove!" I scream aloud at her from my point across the room. But I know what happens next, just as I know the world stopped turning on that horrible day.

As she reaches for the bowl his arm darts out and grabs her, the bowl crashes to the floor. He twists her arm around.

She screams out. "Benjamin, you're hurting me! Don't hurt the baby!" The terror in her voice freezes the blood in my veins. Why can't her husband hear that fear and pleading?

"It is mine, isn't it?" He taunts her. "You are mine and I *will not* have another man in my house!" His other hand comes around to slap her, but he has forgotten the knife he holds with that hand. The blade grazes her cheek and she screams. I feel my bones melting and wonder how many more times I must watch this scene.

"Oh, God, Benjamin, stop! Let me go! Help!"

I discover that I, myself, am screaming. "Let her go! Don't do it! Let her go!" I run across the room to tackle him, forgetting that these are images long past. Benjamin's hand with the knife pulls away from her face and plunges into her chest.

Instantly I feel the crushing pain. My heart is bursting and I can't breathe. Corrine sinks to the floor and gasps for air. "Benj..." she breathes. Her eyelids flutter and then close. I am sick. My stomach threatens to empty out.

Benjamin looks at the still body of his wife and unborn child and awareness dawns on his face. "No. No. NO. NO," is all he can repeat and the rafters tremble. Not only is Corrine gone, but so is the child, his name-sake, that would carry the name into the future. The whole word has ended. He turns his head to the window as if he heard a noise and sees Mr. Hadley standing at the window. The crime has been witnessed from start to finish.

I am utterly exhausted. Reliving this always leaves me spent and unable to move for a time. I lay on the floor sobbing, crying for my lost Corrine. I did love her very much. She was beautiful—perfect—and I was horrible. My trial was quick, the sentence carried out in haste. I was hanged by the neck until dead, but that was not the end. Because

of my jealousy, my love of perfection, my insanity, I must walk through this house and relive the day each year on the anniversary of her death. So for one more year, my misery is complete. ●



HAPPY ST. PATRICK'S DAY

Eric W. Jepson

In 1852 when the McLeerys moved to America, they were pleased with New York and imagined they could make the city their permanent home. But before the decade ended, they were in Boston. Seven years later, Baltimore. Then to Buffalo in '75. By the time the twentieth century rolled around, they had moved all the way west to Cleveland. In 1935 they arrived in Salt Lake and were able to stay for almost a quarter century. Then Logan, Boise, Spokane, Seattle, Vancouver, Portland (for a full decade), and, finally, last May, south to Oakland.

"Ah, now there's some terrible stuff, luv." Traffic on the 80 had been dead for the last five miles and finally the reason for it came into view. A peppy orange SUV had plowed into a peppy pink two-door, and the scent in the air proved what the colors suggested: Young women. Mr. McLeery's tongue touched his upper lip to taste the blood. At least six of them.

"Tragedy we weren't here when it happened, luv. Know how you prefer taking from the already dead." He watched a small round bloodstain on a body bag go into the back of an ambulance, then he hit the gas and the McLeery's '82 Cadillac sped past the scene and into the open freeway beyond.

The McLeery's small, dirty apartment was situated above or next to or across from six Korean restaurants and just around the corner from the BART station on Broadway. This made Mr. McLeery happy. Even after all this time, he still enjoyed few things as much as a ride on the train. Besides, BART was the best way into San Francisco. And the stories people told of San Francisco!

The McLeerys had a deal with the man who ran the parking lot down from their apartment: gold for their own permanent space. They waved to him as they pulled in and parked their car, Mr. McLeery being careful to stay well within his two yellow lines.

"I'm feeling hungry, luv," Mr. McLeery said as they trudged up the stairs to their apartment.

"Oh, don't say that, dearie. You know we filled up before leaving Portland. We should be good for years."

"Aye, aye." Mr. McLeery fumbled with the lock. He still had all their Portland keys on the ring and could never remember which were which. Finally the lock clicked and he let them in. Mrs. McLeery scurried to the backroom to check on the pot, then she went in to the kitchen to make tea. Mr. McLeery sat waiting for her at the table.

"Did you know," he began, "in San Francisco they have a burlesque that's owned by the strippers?"

"You don't say, dearie."

"Imagine! I do wonder if their standards for beauty are higher or lower than other clubs. What do you suppose?"

"I can't imagine."

"Ah, but surely you have an opinion? What do you think, luv?"

"Maybe they start out strict but let them stay longer."

"Och. That could be. That could be..."

"Now, dearie. Don't be getting one of your ideas now. No matter what they look like, they'd be sure to notice one of their own gone missing."

"Aye. Aye."

The kettle whistled and Mrs. McLeery turned to it. As Mr. McLeery watched her, he thought of the accident and the smell of young blood, but what he said was, "How's the tea, then?"

"Fine, dearie. The same as always."

"Aye. The same as always."

MANUEL IBARRA'S GUN, SPORTS & PAWN

Manuel stood next to his cash register rubbing his thumb over the dull yellow lump of gold that Mr. McLeery had handed him. Compared to the neat appearance of his shop, this misshapen chunk of wealth did not seem to belong. He set it on the counter next to the newly framed photograph of his family he had been in the process of hanging when the old Irishman had walked in. It would probably be the last one taken with his twin daughters before they graduated high school and started getting married. He looked at them for a moment then picked the rock back up.

If you don't mind my asking, sir, where do you get this stuff?"

"It has been in me family a good long time." Mr. McLeery smiled at Manuel and Manuel smiled back. It was always this way, once he found the right shop. "And now you know their value, I'll be asking you

to double what I settled for last time. Och, don't look so hurt—I know perfectly well how much you're making on the turnaround. I'm making you rich! All I want's a little for me and me dear old missus."

Manuel's smile was gone. But he nodded as he rubbed the eagle on his forearm. Mr. McLeery pocketed the cash and headed for BART.

It's easy to blend in in San Francisco. Even for a pudgy, red-cheeked, middle-aged white man with steeply widowed red-and-white thatches of hair.

Especially when all he wants to do is look.

"Och, you stink of harlotry, dearie, and don't you deny it!"

"Harlotry indeed. I was only watching the strippers, luv. Getting the lay of the land, so to speak. I'm only interested in your health, luv."

"I know, dearie. But I feel fine. And should for some years."

"To be sure, but you never know but we've got you a weak heart or something and I'd like being prepared."

"But you know how I feel about strippers—"

"Aye. Which is why I look there first." He stepped to his wife and put his arms around her, pressing his hands into the small of her back, sliding them downwards, clutching her buttocks. "But harlotry, luv? Really! You know perfectly well I love no one but you. Indeed, in this age what confuses scrawny with pretty, I'm not apt to find woman flesh enough to suit me outside this apartment." He lowered his lips into the folds of her neck. Mrs. McLeery tittered and fumbled with her husband's belt.

In a corner of their backroom, hidden behind an enormous pile of brooms and mops and old rags, sat the pot, the unquestionable mystery. Once, back in Ireland, they had understood. But their years in America had given them the forgetfulness it gives all immigrants, and now it was merely the pot, their source of wealth, a near-worshipped mystery. Twice had thieves followed Mr. McLeery home and twice he had killed to protect the pot. Those had not been pleasure killings, but they were necessary. And really, what killing is without some satisfaction?

Lying tired and spent and tingling on the kitchen floor, Mr. McLeery fell into his favorite topic.

"I was thinking of getting you some new 'testines," he said. "We haven't replaced them since leaving Logan and it's only a matter of time till they start bothering you."

"They're fine, dearie. If they weren't we'd have replaced them in Portland, like everything else."

"Aye, but it wouldn't hurt. Wouldn't you like it, knowing you were all new down there?"

"I'm fine, dearie. Truly I am."

"But just think—Logan! That was some time ago!"

"Aye." She turned onto her side and kissed his ear, ran her hand through the forest of gray hair on his chest. "What about you? All that smoke and you're still breathing through Boise lungs."

"Boise was much too small for us, luv."

"Aye. Most places are. But how about it? Get yourself some lungs." Mr. McLeery grumbled.

"Please, dearie. Do it for me."

"Ah, I wouldn't know where to look."

"What do you mean? Same place you find young women for me."

"Oh, no. I'll not be watching no sodomites prancing around. Not this McLeery."

Mrs. McLeery made a fist and tugged his chest hair gently. Then she slipped down to his belly hair and tugged there. "You're getting a bit of a rasp, dearie. Just one young man and we'll take all the pieces from him we can. Please." Then she slid her hand further down and with a smile climbed back on top of him. "Do it for me."

MARCH FIRST

"Can you believe it's March already, luv?" asked Mr. McLeery over tea that morning.

"Oh, again. We should just try skipping once. See what happens. Besides, it's a Christian holiday anymore."

"Don't be silly, luv. We were doing it long before the Christians came."

"Christians. There's one we botched."

"Aye. Our biggest blunder, to be sure. We could still be in Éire. Doing what we do. Being what we be."

Mrs. McLeery looked to Mr. McLeery and sighed. "So why do ye insist on reliving it year after year? And besides, this flat's hardly large enough to do it proper."

"Perhaps. But think of the pot, luv."

"Aye. The pot." Mrs. McLeery gazed ahead for a few moments, then stood up to start the dishes.

"Speaking of," said Mr. McLeery as he stood, "I took out a couple this morning."

"Off to Manuel's, then?"

"Aye. Get you anything while I'm out?"

"No, no. Thank you. Just keep your hands clean. All these months and except for taking lungs from that beggar man, you've not hurt a soul. I'm very proud of you."

"Aye, aye. Well, I'm off then."

But Mr. McLeery was hungry. So hungry he could smell unspilt blood. He watched his wife carefully for signs of malady, but she was well and healthy. He tried going to the movies, but those visions of violence were too silly even to be laughed at. And it had been far too long since he had smelled true fear. That beggar had been stone drunk; and he was a man besides.

A breeze blew past Mr. McLeery's nose and his looked to find the bloodscent's source. Behind him walked an obese twenty-year-old woman, the smell of blood pouring off her.

If women didn't menstruate, it might be easier to forget blood and to honor his wife's requests. But menstruate they do. And it's not easy. And surely Mrs. McLeery would understand—

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and kept walking.

19TH STREET OAKLAND BART STATION

Mr. McLeery sat on a bench and watched people get on and off trains all day. March 12th and still he hadn't decided what to do. So he sat and watched and smelled. Sweat. Blood. Pain. Sorrow. And some with so much of Ireland in them to make him salivate.

That evening, as rush hour stumbled to a close, he walked to a nearby bar that claimed to be Irish and drank. Twelve pints later, he rose to go home. Twelve was not a large number for Mr. McLeery, but it was enough that he did not notice the four muscled forms that left the shadows alongside the pub to follow him. He did not notice them until he was at the top of his darkened stairwell, fumbling with his keys, and a hand grabbed his shoulder and flung him down the full flight and three pairs of fists began to pummel his face and body.

At first he was too surprised to do anything but laugh in delight and feel them hit him—the breaking of a rib—teeth. Then he brushed them off, stood and grinned. "All right you bloody bastards, here I am." The largest of the three swung for Mr. McLeery's gut. Mr. McLeery stepped into the punch and brought an elbow down onto the man's shoulder, twisting him around and into Mr. McLeery's face. He grabbed the thug's ear with his teeth and bit it off. Nothing like a woman's, of course, but it had been a long time, and the taste was hot and fresh and

iron in his mouth. He chewed the ear up, the gristle popping between his teeth, and swallowed. With a worthless arm and his head pouring blood, the thug flumped to the floor as Mr. McLeery shoved him away. The other two glanced at their first casualty, then attacked.

One managed a kick to the old man's groin, but otherwise their struggles were short. Mr. McLeery punched and wrenched the stomach from one before biting deep into the throat of the other. He sat for a while on the bottom step and caught his breath while picking at their flesh. He tore out a liver but the man-scent turned his stomach, and he tossed it to the ground.

The first thug was still moaning when Mr. McLeery stood up, so he stomped on his head, pounding and cracking, till the skull gave way. It took longer than he had expected. "Bloody thick skull," he muttered. He looked at the mangled bodies and vaguely thought that he could possibly have used some of those parts, but the alcohol dulled any regret.

And then he remembered the hand at the top of the stairs. He flipped his head upwards where the apartment door stood agape. He ran up and found Mrs. McLeery sitting at the table nursing a scratch on her right hand. She looked up at her husband and frowned at the crusting blood on his face and neck.

"That certainly took you long enough," she said. "And I certainly hope that is not your own blood. Why can't you just break necks and be done with it? Why must ye always make such a mess?"

Mr. McLeery sighed and sat down. "Where's the other one?"

"Trussed up in the other room. I figured you could use him."

"Teeth."

"Well, a young man like him should have some nice ones, dearie." She stood to get him a wet towel to wipe his face. "Were you showing off the gold, then?"

"No, but why else an ugly old man like me? Who do you suppose it was, luv?"

"Well, I'm sure it wasn't the nice man in the parking lot. Your Manuel, perhaps?"

"Is there anyone else?"

"I don't know, dearie. You're the one what takes care of these things."

"Aye. I suppose I'll have a talk with him on the morrow, then."

"Dearie, dearie. First do something with your mess. I've no desire to move again so soon."

"Aye... aye..." He frowned. "I'll take them to Manuel's, leave them outside. We'll see if he mentions it when I stop by. But first I suppose I'll go take those teeth."

"Don't waste him, dearie—surely you can use something else as well."

"I'm fine, luv."

"Let me help you."

"I'm fine."

"Tut tut."

BROADWAY

Mr. McLeery had to admit, as he whistled his way to Manuel's, that he had needed a new heart after all. He hadn't been this energetic in a century. And that last heart barely a year old!

He was still whistling as he squeezed past the police tape and into the pawnshop. Mr. McLeery prepared for some preliminary carnal banter and gold-selling but Manny's wide eyes and slack jaw told him everything.

"Ah, so it was you, Manny. And here I thought we were friends."

No reply.

"Haven't I done enough for you, Manny? And you—a family man! I should think a family man would know better!" He chuckled. "But surely you don't think I'd let a few bloodstains on the sidewalk come between us? Of course not."

No reply save a small tremor.

"No hard feelings. I still need you and your friends didn't hurt me none, the poor bastards." And then an idea. "Tell you what. You know how the missus and me is Irish? Well then. This Friday's a big holiday for us Irish people, you know. Why don't you bring your family over and we'll show you how it's done proper. None of this silly, American corned beef and cabbage rot. We'll show you a real St. Patrick's Day."

Mr. McLeery was all smiles and charm and or-else, and Manuel nodded agreement. Mr. McLeery gave him directions then looked at the photo of Manuel's family and smiled.

"Don't forget anyone, now."

SAINT PATRICK'S DAY

The doorbell rang and there stood the Ibarra in the darkened stairwell. Mr. and Mrs. up front, Mrs. Ibarra holding a Mexican Catholic-style candle with an image labeled "Patricio." Between them

stood their six-year-old youngest, Marisol, in a plastic-pink party dress that caught the apartment's dirty yellow light. On the stair stood eleven- and thirteen-year-old boys; and behind them, Mr. McLeery was pleased to notice, the Ibarra twins: seventeen-year-old girls, heavy, both wearing bras that forced their ample breasts out the top of their matching black t-shirts. Perfect.

"Come in! come in!" Mr. McLeery accepted the candle and ushered the family into the living room where he could still smell the blood of the man whose heart now beat in his chest. "If we squeeze there should be room enough for all of us. Luv, this is our friend Manuel. Manny, would you be so kind as to introduce your lovely family?"

Manuel's face bespoke fear, as did his wife's, but their voices betrayed no sign to their children, whose faces bespoke nothing worse than boredom. Just like all Americans their age, Mr. McLeery cheerfully thought. What a wonderful country.

Mrs. McLeery brought in small cups of warmed cream for the children and Bailey's for the parents which Mr. McLeery had insisted they would expect. They managed small talk for a full half hour and, once, one of the twins had even participated. When the three youngest started getting wiggly, Mr. McLeery asked Manuel to accompany him and they took the children into the back room.

"Here's a box filled with toys, little ones. I buy them throughout the year to give away at Christmastime. To poor kids, you know. But feel free to open them and play with whatever you like."

The boys nodded and Marisol offered a shy thank you. Mr. McLeery started to leave, then paused in the doorway: "Now," he said, "do be careful not to disturb that pile of brooms there. There'll be nothing fun over there—only serious grownup stuff you've no need of." He smiled at the children, then led Manuel back to the living room.

Mr. McLeery watched the worn-looking Manuel sit down on the couch next to his matronly wife and their buxom daughters, each fifteen stone if an ounce. A lovely set of humanity.

Mr. McLeery rested a hand on Mrs. McLeery's right leg and made a comment about the Ibarra's polite children. Mrs. McLeery smiled at Mrs. Ibarra who briefly smiled back. Mrs. McLeery asked about the polite children's schooling and another quarter-hour crept by. After a pause in the conversation, Mrs. McLeery leaned forward on her knees and said, "Now, Mr. Ibarra, surely you would like to see the pot where we keep our gold."

"I—"

"Of course you would. Would you fetch it, dearie?"

Mr. McLeery enjoyed the rush of fear that filled the room before standing.

"Certainly, luv. I'd be delighted."

Most people, judging by artwork in coloring books and Saturday morning cereal advertisements, have no idea what the pot looks like. Yes, it is black. Yes, it is round, roughly. But it is not round like a mother's welcoming breast. It does not sit on three cute, stubby legs. It is not friendly. It is the long lumpy roundness of a witch's fallen teat and it sits heavily and flatly on the ground.

The pot is not smooth. Not even the McLeerys cannot move it without catching their hands and spilling blood.

The pot is large—much larger—larger still—yet thin and leaning, as if it wishes to fall and crush you.

Gold does not mound off the top in well polished, sparkling coins that wink in the sunlight and chase after rainbows and smile at passersby. To discover the contents of the pot, you must reach in and scrape your hands along the edges and discover what is growing there. And you must be ready to yank out your hand at any moment.

Sounds come from the pot. Sounds. Not even the McLeerys discuss these. Yet without your silence, they will pass unheard. And you will approach the pot unwarned.

Mr. McLeery sat the pot in front of Manuel and his wife with a grunt. The skin between his left thumb and forefinger caught and tore. "Shite!" He stuck it in his mouth and grimaced. Nothing tastes so poor as one's own blood.

"This is our pot, dearies," said Mrs. McLeery, leaning back into her chair. "Such a wonderful thing."

The twins rolled their eyes.

"There was once," Mrs. McLeery whispered, looking above their heads, "that we fed the pot a pig on this date. That was a hard year. But I've often felt..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. We were having a good time just moments ago, weren't we? And now I've gone and acted like a dull old lady." She smiled. "Such a beautiful family you have. Sometimes... sometimes I just get comfortable and forget who I am."

Mr. McLeery stood behind her and squeezed her shoulder with his undamaged hand. "At any rate," he said, "I'm sure your father has told you about our gold." He smiled at the twins, then forced himself to acknowledge their parents as well. "We owe your father so much. I feel,

in the spirit of St. Patrick's Day, we would be amiss not to offer you something. The pot is full! There's plenty enough for you each to have your own piece. And we insist you do."

Besides the fact that prostitutes and strippers and the like tend to disappear with fewer noticing, they are generally easier to lure away in the first place. And less likely to realize before it is too late that something is amiss. But whores are also hardened and jaded and they never smell strongly enough of fear.

And they often stink of other men's juices.

And they feel less pain.

These twins, however... *these twins*. Mr. McLeery could not stop watching them. Oh, they *thought* they were jaded. To be sure! They were teenagers! But they didn't know pain. It would be new to them. And they did not know fear. They couldn't even smell it pouring off their own parents.

Tonight, of course, was the night for feeding the pot. But Mr. McLeery was also hungry. And as he watched those breasts, he knew he must have them for himself. Then, perhaps, he could also slice some tender strips from between their legs or from the lovely flesh at their waists. But those breasts! If he could have but one he could be satisfied!

"Do be careful, dearie—the top edge can be a little ragged."

Mrs. Ibarra had a steely look that suggested the time had come to get this over with and then no more of these strange Irish people—her Manuel could just find other people's junk to sell. *But no more of this*. Not with Pedro and Chelo and Oscar and Hector on slabs at the morgue. They were bad boys, sí, but she knew their mothers, and Hector had loved her Selena and would have married her except now he was dead and mangled and toothless. It was time to accept their gifts and leave. What in the *world* had they been thinking?

She reached in and felt around. She reached deeper. She reached in and— "Ah ha! I— Oh!" She lurched forward, smacking her forehead on the far lip of the pot. She screamed and with her other hand grasped the edge and struggled to push herself up. Blood ran into her eyes and formed bright red tear tracks down her cheeks. Manuel leapt to assist her with Mr. McLeery close behind. The girls hurried forward also, crying "Mama!" and Mr. McLeery breathed in deep, finally tasting that anise aroma of young female fear. Mrs. McLeery squealed and clapped her hands, then Manuel fell to the floor and his wife, impossibly, fell into the pot and disappeared.

Instantly Manuel was on his feet with a pistol, screaming “Where is she?” and long streams of Spanish the McLeerys could not understand.

Then he thought to wonder where his other children were. He screamed their names and Mr. McLeery pointed to the pot. Manuel pulled the trigger, but Mr. McLeery was upon him. Gunshots rang out, then Manuel and gun were thrust headfirst into the pot over the hysterics of his daughters.

Mr. McLeery was triumphant. The pot was fed, the twins were his. He turned to his wife in triumph but she was staring down at four gushing holes in her chest. Mr. McLeery leapt past the pot, ripped off her dress and laid his wife on the ground. He pulled open her chest and examined the damage. The heart was destroyed, but still pumping, throwing blood over him and the floor. Gashes tore through both lungs and severed the esophagus from the stomach. Mr. McLeery scrambled up and toward the twins. One fainted. The other’s hair he grabbed and smashed her face into a wall. The moon-shaped hole was specked with blood and eye but still she struggled. He mashed her again and again against a stud in the wall until her skull went spongy and she stopped moving. He dragged her corpse over to his wife and tore open her clothes and body, her hefty, young breasts hitting the carpet, one on each side.

There was no rush, but Mr. McLeery hurried all the same. First he swapped out the heart, then he used his fingers to clear the pools of blood from his wife to see what should be done next. He took some skin and abdominal muscle, using it to fill in the outer holes. He took the girl’s stomach and intestines and replaced his wife’s. He took both her lungs and an unusually large and healthy kidney. He worked swiftly and silently, the only sounds his wife’s ragged breathing and the faint background wailings from the pot. Slowly her breathing grew calm as the edges of the corpse beside her grayed.

Finally, he was done. He pushed her flesh back together and watched it bind. He kissed her and she slowly sat up.

“How do you feel, luv?”

“Lovely, dearie, thank you. I fee—Is that one of those girls there? One’s still left?”

“Aye. Would you like to throw her in the pot, luv?”

Mrs. McLeery stood and shrugged off the bloody shreds of her clothing. She walked to the pot and peered inside. Some bloodied scraps of Mrs. Ibarra’s dress hung on the side and she plucked them

off.

“No, dearie. The pot’s had a fine year already. I should say you deserve her. I know you’ve been hungry.”

She walked over to her husband and slid a hand under his belly and into his pants. “But, dearie. I saw how you looked at her. I saw you thinking of the fat in those breasts. And it is about time, you know. We’ve been in this country a good long time. So before you push your fingers through her fatty diddies or swallow her lips, I want you to do something for me.”

“Aye?”

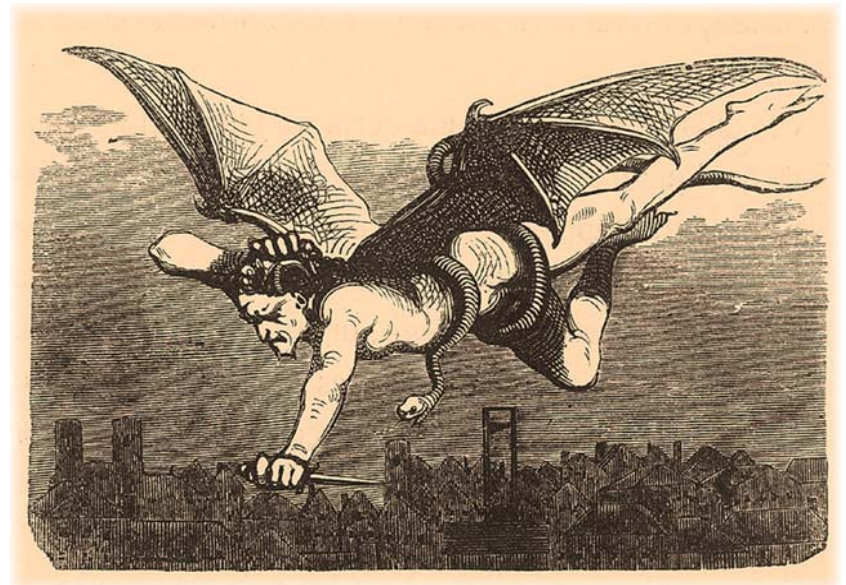
“I’m thinking it’s time.” She squeezed her hand. “Take her first, then give me her womb.”

“Luv!”

Mrs. McLeery brought her husband’s mouth to her own and slid off his pants. “But let her wake first, dearie. I want to smell her pain.”

Mrs. McLeery stepped away and sat down to watch, the fingers of her left hand combing her pubic hair. So they would have to leave this place. Fine. It’s not like they had to pack. All they had to take was a young girl’s fertile womb.

And one old, misshapen pot. ●





FusionTees

Enjoy the finest T-shirts
in genre-friendly designs
-- pulp covers, movie
posters, and just plain
high-browed fun. All
available in a variety
of styles for men,
women, and children.
Amaze your friends,
confound your enemies!

FusionTees.com
shirts for sentients

THE DIET

Maura McHugh

"We've nothing in common any more," Lucy said.

The pepperoni calzone in Frank's stomach congealed into a mixture of acid, fat, and fear. "But—"

Lucy raised her bronzed hand in an imperious demand for silence. A waiter with slicked-back hair glided to their table with a massive pepper mill.

"Three years, Frank," she paused to smile up at the waiter, "no thank you." She revolved her attention back to Frank, her tone frosty. "Haven't we wasted enough time?"

Frank shook his head at the waiter, and thought he detected a flicker of fraternal sympathy in the server's face as he departed.

How many men had that waiter seen humiliated?

"Frank!" her tone sharp and exasperated. She rose—her red curls flounced—and the chair screeched a protest. A neighbouring couple frowned at the noise.

Wedged into a corner, his belly trapped by the table's lip, Frank struggled to stand. "Lucy—"

"Don't bother get up," she sneered. The waiter materialised with Lucy's Burberry overcoat, and held it so she could ease into it. "You're so helpful," she murmured to him.

"Anything for such a *bella donna*."

Lucy's cheek's pinked.

Instantly, Frank despised the waiter's mismatched Dublin-meets-Milan accent and slippery charm.

Lucy opened her purse, and extracted enough euros to cover the bill with a generous tip.

Frank protested. "Let me pay at least!"

Lucy pressed the notes into the waiter's eager hand. "*Grazie mille*," her Italian accent was crude, but sexy. The waiter's smile smarmed wider.

"Please Lucy, don't leave." Frank hated the whine in his voice. The

waiter had the manners to vanish. "I'm sorry. I'll change."

She was already angled towards the exit. When she turned her lovely face towards him it was stripped of masks. Brutal contempt glared at him. "Change? You've changed enough. Look at you, Frank. What happened?"

He bent his head, and noticed the straining buttons on his striped shirt, the sauce drips on his Homer Simpson tie, and the buckle that strained on the final notch of his belt. Frank could not meet her gaze or respond to her question.

The bell over the door jangled.

She was gone.

"Christ, Frank, you look like shite." Mattie's sing-song Cork accent rose to new heights. He shoved his chair away from his workstation and rolled towards Frank's alcove.

Frank slumped into his swivel chair. "Lucy dumped me." He slipped on his phone headset.

His friend switched from concerned to outraged. "The bitch! Why?"

"Something about different directions."

Mattie ignored the blinking light on his phone. "I bet the only thing going in different directions were her legs, boyo."

Jack, their supervisor, bore down on them, a pissed-off expression on his face and a heavy folder in his manicured hand.

Mattie zoomed back into his niche, and made a drinking gesture with an imaginary glass. "Consolation pints later?"

Frank had no time to answer before Jack launched into a tirade about the evils of long lunches. Throughout his supervisor's lecture, during which Frank nodded at the appropriate moments, Mattie's insinuation looped in Frank's mind so his thoughts circled around one question.

"Do you think she was cheating on me?"

Mattie pushed one of the two pints of Guinness sitting the mahogany counter at Frank. "Get that into you." Behind the bar, hanging between arched mirrored alcoves, the mounted Stag's head stared down at them with its small black glass eyes. Frank averted his gaze, sucked a mouthful of creamy stout, and tried to avoid being jostled by the thirsty punters calling out orders to the barman.

Mattie wiped white foam from his moustache, and sighed his bliss before his expression turned sombre. "I saw her with someone."

Frank swallowed more Guinness. It tasted bitter.

"Last Thursday. On Grafton Street. They looked friendly—too friendly."

Lucy told Frank she was out with her girlfriends that night. He didn't inform Mattie; dignity was scarce.

"You're better off without her," Mattie added, "she was a stuck-up cow."

Frank regarded his reflection in the slick dark surface of the pint glass. A tiny head and massive body stared back at him: a fat clown.

He pushed the porter away. "I'm going to win her back."

Frank marched towards his apartment. His arms pumped with the force of good intentions. As he passed the brightly lit window of a travel agency he slowed. In a diorama an Egyptian pyramid loomed over a svelte couple: the tanned man in trunks had perfect abs, and the athletic woman in the swimsuit resembled Lucy. She always wanted to visit Egypt, but Frank loathed the idea of the heat and foreign food, and put her off until she gave up pestering him.

He was going to get back into shape. He'd join a gym, or return to rugby. On Monday he'd talk to Jack, and change his attitude about his job. Maybe change career. He'd scrape together enough cash for an adventure holiday: Egypt, Peru, China... somewhere exciting and exotic.

Frank turned a corner and into a narrow side street, the location of his favourite bakery. Every morning Marco the barista brewed Frank a grande cappuccino, and sold him a pain au chocolat. The smell of baking bread and freshly ground coffee prompted a grumble from his stomach.

Most of all he needed to go on a diet.

Frank crossed the road to elude temptation, and noticed a tiny shop bright with fresh paint. A luminous sign pasted to cardboard leaned in the bare window.

"The Diet never fails!" its gaudy headline promised. Frank read the rest of the neatly printed page. It boasted of a diet plan that guaranteed dramatic weight loss within a month. The old pie-loving Frank would have dithered, then walked away. Instead, Frank opened the door, and approached the chrome counter with purpose.

A gaunt man wearing glasses with tinted lenses glanced up from a book. The florescent light shimmered off his marble skin, and bleached his blond hair white. His nostrils flared as if he smelled something

fragrant. "May I help you?" His voice had an east European burr.

"I want to lose weight."

The man smiled, and offered his hand. "You're in the right place. I'm Goran." His limp handshake was moist, and Frank itched to wipe his palm on his trousers. "Our product is a mixture of freeze-dried herbs, plants, and minerals, which is fashioned from an ancient recipe." Goran reached under the counter and presented a round plastic container with a lurid purple label. "You take two heaped tablespoons a day in water, instead of food, and for your third meal you eat whatever you like."

"That's all?" Frank picked it up. Hypnotic yellow letters boasted that the ingredients were "All Natural!"

"We also offer a support meeting once a week for our customers, free of charge."

"How much?"

"That box costs 100 euros."

"What?" Frank almost dropped it. "That's outrageous."

"What price tag do you put on your health?" Goran's long fingers stroked the container. "If you follow the plan exactly, and you are not completely satisfied after a month your money will be refunded."

"Do you take it yourself?"

Goran's thin lips peeled back from his teeth. "Oh yes."

Frank dug his wallet out of his pocket. "I suppose you have to say that, eh?" He counted out two fifty-euro notes.

Goran placed the container into a brown paper bag and offered it to him. "The next meeting is 6pm, this Friday. Please come."

Frank took the package. He needed motivation. "See you Friday, Goran."

Frank paused on the threshold of the shop for a moment, and smiled. He was making a change. Soon his life would be different.

In his kitchen Frank eyed the glass doubtfully. Shredded moss-like clumps floated within a dark bilious liquid. He sniffed it, and yanked it away from his face. It stank of stagnant pond.

He held his breath and gulped a mouthful.

Frank made it to the sink before he spat it out. The taste of rotting fish and a slimy texture coated his tongue. He picked up the glass and held it over the plughole, ready to toss it.

"100 euros," he said. He smelled the concoction again. It wasn't as bad as the first whiff. He imagined Lucy, supple and tanned, lounging

in a bikini on their cruise down the River Nile.

He knocked it back, and willed his constricting throat to accept the goop.

It would be worth it.

The next morning's drink wasn't as bad, although Frank had a couple of queasy moments when he thought he might puke.

He didn't grab a taxi or ride the bus to work, but walked the whole way. He passed the bakery and waved to Marco through the window.

When he arrived in the office he was sweating and red-faced, but he tackled his backlist of calls and by lunchtime he was ahead of schedule.

Mattie peered over the partition. "You angling for a promotion?"

At lunch Frank polished off a bowl of soup, and a steak with mashed potatoes. He tried not to contemplate that it would be his last solid food for twenty-four hours.

Mattie's eyebrows rose when Frank refused after-work pints, but didn't comment. Frank even walked home through the slanting rain.

That evening the mixture didn't taste any better, but Frank gagged it down.

He remembered the first night he'd made love to Lucy, when his waist was thinner and he didn't mind leaving the light on.

Soon, his former body and girlfriend would return.

The water was salty, warm, and dark. Illumination came from the phosphorous glow on the talons of rock that clawed up from the black void below.

Far above Frank sunlight sparkled on the surface.

The pressure changed. Something waited below. A chill seeped into his bones, and a primitive terror seized him.

He was naked, and underwater!

Panic flooded him and he trashed up towards the light. His lungs shrieking for air.

Frank woke, choking.

On Friday evening when Frank opened the shop door Goran was sitting in the same spot as if he never moved. "Welcome, Frank." Goran rose, and pointed to an entrance behind a curtain of beads. "How're you doing?"

"It tastes vile, you know."

Goran inclined his head. "Your palate will adjust."

Beads clicked as Frank walked into the dim stuffy room. Three people sat on plastic chairs arranged in a circle. Against the back wall a table covered in a white paper tablecloth held a kettle, cups, a box of tea, a jar of instant coffee, a carton of milk, and jugs of water. Candles provided soft lighting.

Frank nodded at the two women and the man, and joined them in the circle. He coughed. They watched him. A plain stocky woman smiled at him and flashed dimples.

"I'm Frank," he said.

"Dora," the taller, darker woman.

"Maeve," said the dimpled woman.

"Brian," offered the huge man. His arms were crossed across his chest like a barrier.

Goran walked in and sat among them. "We'll begin with a meditation for relaxation, and then we'll discuss your progress. Now, if you will close your eyes please..."

Afterwards, Frank sipped his coffee and listened to Maeve. "My last boyfriend joked about my weight all the time. He'd compare me to other women in public, and in front of friends or family."

"What a tosser," the words slipped out.

Maeve's dimples made another appearance. "I might have low self-esteem, but I'm not an idiot. I broke up with him." Her voice crumpled at the end.

"My ex didn't like my weight gain either. I played rugby at college when we met. But, when I started working I found it hard to make time for it. She encouraged me to join her gym, but..." he shrugged to imply his disinterest.

Behind him he heard Dora speak to Goran. "I'm always submerged in an ocean. But there's something in there with me. Something that frightens me."

Maeve laid her hand on Frank's arm, so he didn't catch Goran's murmured response. "As long as you're not losing weight for her, Frank." She paused. "Once I tried to change for a man... my ex-husband. He left anyway, and I gained even more weight." She laughed, but her eyes brimmed.

Her painful honesty prompted him to kindness. "I don't think you need to change."

She squeezed his arm in wordless thanks, and noticed his watch.

"I have to go. See you next Friday?"

"Looking forward to it." And he was.

It became natural to breathe underwater.

At first Frank stayed close to the surface, but over time he explored further. He swam between the needles of rock, and examined the carbuncles and growths that glowed white, blue, and pink.

Once he thought he saw the flash of a body, but it vanished below.

The water cooled the deeper he went, and it was harder to see.

The first time he sank far below he spied a mammoth shadow. Dread paralysed his limbs and he drifted helplessly towards its monstrous darkness.

He woke screaming, his heart pounding, and could not close his eyes until dawn.

That morning he skipped the drink, and stopped at the bakery. Marco, delighted to welcome back a wayward customer, gave him the pastry for free. Frank was starving by the time he arrived at work, but when he bit into the light pastry the sugary taste sickened him. He offered the rest of it to Mattie. Frank found it hard to concentrate, and a mug of coffee didn't help or satisfy his parched mouth. His stomach cramped, and he longed for the satisfying texture of his morning tonic.

By lunchtime he was shivering and sweaty. A taxi carried him home, and when he measured the tablespoons of supplement his hand shook—from anticipation.

After the drink was ready, Frank hesitated. What was in that stuff? What was it doing to him? He closed his eyes, and contemplated the solace of deep waters.

When he opened his eyes again he noticed the red light blinking on his home phone. He pushed the button to retrieve the voicemail.

Lucy spoke in the brusque tones she used with tradesman: "Hi Frank. I dropped by and picked up the rest of my things. I left my key on the hall table since I won't need it again. Bye."

Frank slammed the handset on the counter and the plastic case split in half. He seized the remains and flung them across the room. They exploded inside the ghost square on the wall where their shared photograph used to hang.

He grabbed the drink and gulped it back fast. Immediately he felt stronger, in control.

Lucy hadn't seen the new Frank yet, so of course she still thought

of him as a pudgy loser. He stuck his finger inside the rim of the glass and wiped the gooey residue off. It tasted delicious.

When she saw how much he'd changed, she'd return. His finger dipped into the glass again and snagged a wet clump. Frank sucked it into his mouth like spaghetti and licked his lips.

Or maybe...

"There are plenty of fish in the sea," he said out loud, and laughed.

On the morning of his fourth Friday meeting Jack invited Frank into his office.

Jack stabbed his finger at a graph on his desk. "Whatever you're doing, don't stop." A mauve line spiked upwards on the chart. "Your sales are climbing, you're on time, efficient, and ahead of schedule. If you remain at this pace we're going to discuss the terms of your promotion by month's end."

As they shook hands outside the office door, Jack paused to reappraise him. "Have you lost weight?"

Mattie pounced on him by the cooler as Frank drank a large cup of water.

"Are you joining us for drinks tonight? Afterwards we're going to a club." Mattie bit his lower lip and performed a little boogie.

Frank shook his head. "I can't."

"Have you become a hermit or something?"

"I'm going for a swim and then I've a meeting—"

"What meeting?"

Frank swirled the water in his plastic cup. He checked to see if anyone was within eavesdropping distance. "I'm on a new diet, and there's a support meeting—"

"Hey, maybe I could try it." Mattie patted his modest waist. "You can never be too slim."

Frank hesitated. He didn't want Mattie to go to the meeting. He'd make fun of it, and being such a cheap bastard he'd whine about the cost of the supplement. Plus, it wouldn't work for him.

Mattie wasn't suitable.

"Did you just sniff me?"

Frank frowned at his friend. "What?"

"You just sniffed me."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Look, it's called Brute Force."

Frank's bemused expression elicited an explanation.

"My aftershave! The birds go mad for it."

"Thanks for the tip." Frank returned to his desk, glad for the diversion.

During the meeting Frank could not pry his attention from Maeve. She glowed. She smiled. She'd slimmed down.

Their ranks had climbed to ten. Dora, Brian, Maeve and he were happy to encourage the newcomers to stick to the regime.

"I like the taste of it now," Dora said. Frank nodded. The newbies were skeptical, but the testaments of weight loss were impressive.

Afterwards the four of them refused tea and coffee and drank water from the jugs Goran supplied.

"You're even off the tea?" a hefty middle-aged woman asked Frank, aghast.

He placed his empty glass on the table. "It's important to keep hydrated, and water is better, purer. I can't get enough of it." With his peripheral vision he watched Maeve offer advice to a spotty bespectacled youth.

Jealousy surged in him, hot and sudden. He turned and touched her arm. A strange noise vibrated in his chest. The young man stepped backwards. Maeve tilted her face up, and responded in a similar manner but at a higher pitch. The boy retreated.

Frank and Maeve linked hands.

His swimming improved. He darted in between the pillars of rock, and dove deeper. His eyes had adjusted to the gloomy waters. Now, so much more was visible.

The previous night he had discovered the wreck. It was covered in growths, shells, and cankers. Iridescent sediment drifted upwards from its gnarled surface, which curved down into the darkness. Huge masts, like spines, erupted along one side. He could not discern what kind of craft it had once been.

He floated towards the crust, and a flash of white between the masts attracted him. He moved closer.

She was naked.

Bone-white hair floated in tendrils around her ghostly face and huge eyes. Her movements possessed the grace of one born to this place. He swam closer. Her presence was magnetic, alluring.

When he stared into her eyes the shock of recognition electrified him.

Maeve.

She kissed him hard, and it inflamed him.

Pain lanced through his tongue, and he pulled back. She smiled at him. Her sharp teeth tinged pink.

His tongue wiggled in an odd way. He touched his fingers to it, and felt its new bifurcated form.

He seized her and plundered her mouth. Their tongues separated, tiny serrated edges slid out and their interlocking tongues sealed together. Pain and desire mounted.

They wrapped their limbs around each other, drifted down towards the hulking wreck, and trashed and squirmed in ecstasy upon its cancerous hide.

The following evening Frank saw Maeve at the swimming pool. Her pale figure, encased in a swimsuit with a scaled pattern, was a beacon among the clumsy bodies that churned and wallowed in the water. He swam to her, nimbly, and she turned before he could touch her.

For a long moment they stared at each other. Words were superfluous.

His fingers encircled hers.

A whale of a man surged past them towards the steps. "Out of the way!" He brushed against Frank, and recoiled. "Freak," he muttered under his breath.

Frank didn't care. He climbed out of the pool, and offered Maeve a hand when she followed. They paid no heed to the whispers that trailed after them.

That night Maeve moved into his apartment.

"Is that you, Frank?"

Frank turned in the crowded street, his hand clasped with Maeve's.

Lucy stared at him, her expression shocked. He moved to where she stood transfixed.

"My God, you've lost so much weight." Concern wrinkled around her eyes. "You're not ill, are you? You seem... pale."

Frank lifted his sunglasses over his forehead, and squinted in the mellow evening light. "I'm fine, I've been on a diet. Lucy, this is Maeve," Maeve's hand tightened in his grip. The women nodded at each other.

"I want to thank you Lucy," Frank said. "If you hadn't been honest with me I wouldn't have changed." His lips pulled back from his teeth

in a smile, and Lucy stepped back. "I wouldn't have met Maeve."

Lucy clutched her Louis Vuitton handbag to her chest like a shield. "I'm glad, Frank, that you're... are you sure you're well?" She reached out to touch his arm, but Maeve flashed between them. Frank raised his hand and stroked the sensitive ridges on the back of Maeve's neck—hidden by the collar of her shirt—and she relaxed.

"I've never been better." His hand dropped down and Maeve's hand found it instantly. "We must be going. It was good seeing you again."

Lucy nodded, her face tight with suppressed words, and walked away.

Maeve looked up at him, and Frank marvelled at the fine cheekbones that sculpted her face now The Diet was erasing her excess flesh. She had bleached her hair platinum blond, and in the sunlight her complexion seemed dusted with frost.

"How did I ever find her attractive?" Frank said. "She's so tanned, and muscular."

Maeve grimaced in agreement. "And that red hair!" She thrilled low in her throat, and kissed him on the cheek. Her tongue darted out to lick his skin. "She was a fool."

He shivered, and pulled her body close to his. "Let's go for a swim," he muttered into her ear.

The new office had a large window, real timber desk, and an ergonomic chair. Frank adjusted the slatted blinds to cut the glare of the morning sun into a more agreeable light. He removed his sunglasses.

Jack knocked on the open door, and strolled into the room. "If you continue to accomplish in six months what you did in six weeks then I'll have to watch out for my job."

Frank sank into the chair behind his desk, and slid his hands over the armrests. He felt the texture of his desk, and stroked the metallic sides of his LCD monitor. His list of calls glowed on the screen. "I must get to work," he said. Frank turned his tiny headphone over in his fingers and traced its shiny contours before he placed it on his ear.

Jack grinned at him. "My favourite words. I won't interrupt." Jack paused at the doorway, and turned. "Sorry to mention this, Frank, but Susan in HR said there'd been complaints about a health shake you've been making in the kitchen?"

"It's an old herbal recipe. It speeds up the metabolism and

promotes well-being."

"Yeah, well Susan says it stinks like hell. Actually, I think she used the term fish guts."

Frank smiled. "It's pungent. Now that I have this office I'll prepare it here."

"Fantastic. You're looking great, by the way. I'm not sure about the blond hair, but I wish I knew your secret" Jack pinched his waist, which hinted at middle-aged doughiness.

Frank inhaled, but did not taste the correct need. "A healthy diet, plenty of exercise, and a loving girlfriend."

Jack raised his hands. "Whoa! How easy. You forgot a strong work ethic, Frank."

"That too."

His boss shook his head in amazement. "You're a saint."

"I'm committed." Frank looked down at his paperwork, and Jack took the cue to leave and harass less-dedicated employees.

Later, after the office was empty and quiet, Frank opened his desk drawer and removed the boxes of supplement. His fingers traced the label and he wondered how he ever thought it was garish. Now he could see the lines of blue and red that underlay the purple, and etched a star that enclosed a staring eye. It was attractive and vibrant. It watched over him.

He unfolded the list Goran handed him at the last meeting. He switched on the headset, and tapped in the numbers. The phone rang, and a woman's voice answered.

"Your friend, Dora, recommended you for a one-time offer that guarantees weight loss in a month, or your money back. Do you have a few moments to discuss the revolutionary weight-loss regime, The Diet?"

A dozen of them floated in a circle above the knotted surface of the wreck.

Maeve glided by Frank's side. Goran hung opposite them. Soon there would be more.

They opened their mouths, and the glorious vibrations that emerged were a hymn to the deep and the creatures that slumbered in its shadows.

A movement beneath him. Frank glanced down and noticed a leprous growth crumble and sink into the void. Elated, he squeezed Maeve's hand, and intoned the song that would wake the slumbering

giant.

A corrugated shelf of rock and shells cracked, and slid off. Underneath, a gargantuan eye glistened. A wicked black pupil the size of Frank's head darted under its scabrous lid and fixed on his adoring gaze.

What remained of his human faculties fled—unable to bear the regard of a creature that had witnessed the birth of stars and the demise of countless civilisations.

Frank joined with the chorus of dirges, and prayed for the time when their numbers would be enough to shake their ancient master truly awake.●



TO SOOTHE THE SAVAGE BEAST

Edward Morris

On the first afternoon I trained there, Eli, the Senior Officer on-site, explained the principle of my new job.*

*Ha. My new joke, my new “permanent post” (like there really was such a thing at our company, or ever could be) at the North Portland office of the Oregon Department of Human Misery, I mean Services, way out on MLK and Lombard...

“Batman don’t work here no more,” Eli imparted, “We are a presence. We call stuff in. We do not pre-emptively do anything except de-escalate. What’s that in your pocket?”

“Nothing,” I replied. His rheumy, off-kilter eyes became a lot less rheumy and off-kilter, all of a sudden, and the flat pegs of his teeth bared under his upper lip in a proto-snarl I was beginning to seriously dislike. I quickly switched tacks. “It’s three. I gotta go do the do.”

“Do so,” he replied wearily through his pencil-line mustache, and headed back out for the parking lot to redirect the open sewer of road rage that funneled through it. Some schmoid just dinged the fender on a County delivery truck, and the guy in the front seat was stoned. Not the driver, just the passenger.

Eli had to call all that in. I didn’t envy him. I rarely did. However, I found out every detail of the issue not from him, the senior officer on site, but from listening and piecing the issue together.

Eli might be known to yell, “Fire!” if he had spontaneously combusted, but only on the off chance that he’d misplaced the extinguisher. And he’d been working that site for twelve years. He never misplaced anything.

Capernaum Dining Hall, Eli’s side of the house, was awash with a ferocious waft of fried fish. The old 46” Sony TV with duct-tape on every switch and instruction cards on every kludged knob blared Pat Robertson at arena volume loud enough to ring the big metal racks of day-old bread and donated newspapers and magazines standing against the back wall.

Away from the TV, the post-lunch silence was oddly funerary on that side of the building, up the ramp from the little desk where they had me directing traffic and pretending to look busy in front of the huddled masses of aging and disabled yearning for common sense from their government.

That government shoved its employees between that common sense and the viral replication of offices just like this one. Even we guards, nominally independent contractors, weren’t immune, since we, too, were shoved into the face of trouble with no statutory authority to do anything but stand around and de-escalate the problem by eating shit from every side of it.

It felt like I’d worked in every damn DHS office in the state that summer, with no idea what my schedule was going to be from one week to the next or if they’d even see fit to throw me a bone that week at all. Up and down the chain, the story was the same.

I went back to the break room, reached in my pocket and put the can of police-grade Oleoresin Capsicum spray I wasn’t supposed to have back into my satchel to take home.

People were so nose-y at these County offices. I supposed that came with the gig. But I decided I didn’t want to be sore at Eli about it. He was just an idiot like me and everyone else, just a man, with his own ticks and grimaces. He was trying. We all were.

Just then, one of the volunteers (I was sure his name was Sly) walked over and sat down at the old cherrywood piano on the Capernaum side while I ruminated at the bottom of the ramp.

His voice pulled me up short when the keys started doing the walking and the music socked us all in the face like a tsunami of light, a haunting number that was either original or a cut-up of too many other songs to name...

I seen some things...

Oh, Willie seen some things...

I was listening with half an ear, putting the period on the end of an Incident Report about a handful of syringes I’d caught some fool stuffing into the trash can. The guy claimed he was diabetic.

I... RRR... HAAAAH... I feel my blues,

Sly’s voice changed just then, losing its rasp, thudding down to a

washtub-bass baritone register. I was impressed.

*Just because I gotta understand
The thing that's eatin' me alive
Each night, grind me through its guts to
Goopher dust the priest make a cross with
On your forehead in the Church
Of Hard Knocks...*

With no doctor on site, I had to let Diabetic Man slide, after upbraiding him for not knowing proper sharps-disposal protocols, "For your INSULIN syringes full of RECYCLED BLOOD. How long you been 'diabetic'?"

Without a word more, my "diabetic" turned on his heel and left the scene. Mission Accomplished. As with everything else in that Incident Pit, though, the next answer opened up fourteen new questions:

"I'm still learning everyone's names," I said in Sly's ear when that haunting song was done. "I... I thought they said they called you Sly, not Willie."

The applause was dying down. One of the senior volunteers in every sense of the word took the bingo-mic at the little Crate amp on the table to the left of the dish-dogs' station.

"LADEEZ AND GENTLEMEN," he began, but we were both tuning him out.

"They do," Sly shrugged eloquently. "Who said they don't?"

I shook my head. "I was a bouncer for a while. Blew out part of my hearing. Sorry to interrupt."

"Ain't nothin'," Sly answered affably, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. The other volunteer was still doing his carnival-barker routine, "LIKETAGIVEABIGOL MLK WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST VOLUNTEER..."

Then his amp cut out, awash in a shearing, feral roar of static that sounded like something nailed down and in torment. The lights began to flicker, and that damn noise in the wall I didn't understand started up again.

"Shit. Second time today, and they were *just here!*"

I scooted outside to call Facilities Management again, this time in a spot where I could get decent reception for the entire call. Whatever was going off-line and FUBAR in the walls had a nasty tendency to knock stuff off shelves in straight rows up and down the length of the

building, I'd come to find. (When assigning me to it, Patsy called the post a "learn-as-you-go" experience. I thought I understood.)

Something in the pipes, maybe. I didn't know enough about the building to hazard a guess, or do anything else but document each hair-raising incident. Kathy the caseworker was clutching the pentacle around her neck a lot and mumbling about non-physical critters and ozone and stuff. Hell, all the caseworkers thought we were having little earthquakes, but each time the disturbance would stop as soon as...

As soon as it started. As soon as it started, Sly would... start to play the piano, and then it would...

"Stop," I told myself. I was worn down to a nub. My imagination thus had no checkrein the way it did when I was well-rested. No one has as many tools when they're tired, and sitting that post was so goddamn boring I made up stories about the place when I'd read through all that week's newspapers and they didn't have any new Smithsonians or National Geographics up in the dining hall...

But my mind wouldn't come back from the edge of the cliff from which it had just bungee-jumped. There were things swimming out past that edge, suppositions that looked insanely sane, maddeningly insoluble, yet not without a certain kind of sense to them...

An old lady walked past me as I dialed, shaking her head. "Child, you need to get to bed, tonight," she informed me. I nodded. The understanding I'd just had was gone. "You know that's right."

When I came back in, Sly was still merrily playing the piano. I truly listened to the song, and realized that this time I knew all the words.

It was a rollicking old swing tune from the Thirties, in 6/8 tempo with lots of over-and-under shuffle and gloss and schmaltz, the kind of schmaltz that eventually became Reggae when it crossed the Gulf of Mexico and made it to Jamaica. It was Boogie-Woogie in a white tuxedo, I realized, one degree away from undiluted Blues...

And God damn if I hadn't just watched the pre-WWII answer to a music video for this very tune on YouTube just last week.

The song was one of Cab Calloway's most famous numbers. I waited for the beat to come round again, and bellowed, blissfully oblivious of consequence,

*"Have you ever met that funny Reefer Man?
That funny, funny, funny Reefer Man?
He smokes a reefer, he gets high,
And then he flies up to the sk— Oh, sh— oot. Sorry.."*

I forgot I was wearing a tin star, you see, a flashlight at my hip pocket, a uniform that was a symbol to the subconscious mind of every person who saw it, whether or not it came with any actual authority attached.

I'd stepped out of line. I could feel laughter and bad looks everywhere. Particularly from Eli.

Once you got past his bark, Eli was all right, as Stuporvisors went. At the moment, he just shook his militant mutant pompadour where he sat at the desk in the opposite corner from the piano, and put his head in his hands.

"We're supposed to be keepin' the loaded ones *out* of the bathrooms, dammit, not joinin' *in!*" he roared at me, but there was no malice in it. In the other corner of the dining hall, playa' just kept right on playing.

Sly would be hard to get to know, I assumed at first, but I was dead wrong. He was merely a man of few words. He was homeless, or semi-homeless, and always left Capernaum just before the Manager did, at five, after taking a nap and... the rest of what he did. The rest of what he did for us. The rest of what he gave to me.

The first time we spoke, I asked him why he worked like someone had a gun pointed at him. The question was meant as a joke to break the ice, but it fell flat. Sly looked at me funny, out of those Magic 8-Ball eyes, like he wanted to laugh but couldn't.

"I don't come here to do no *work*," he croaked in that cormorant croak that sang like Satchmo and coughed over the keys when the floor was mopped and it wasn't four o'clock any more but it was nowhere near five...

"I come here to give *back*. Some of us got a lot to, Security. And some of us takes a lot *on*."

I thought I knew what he meant. "You're in recovery," I surmised. "Me too. It—"

Sly shook his shaven head immediately, black warmup jacket rustling at the hoody neck and shoulders.

"I don't come here for that, neither," he said to the floor, "I didn't get no *Nuuuudge* from a *Juuudge*. I said I came here to give *back*. You'll learn. Work here long enough. None of 'em do, none of you do."

He flapped one spatulate-fingered, heavily callused hand, smiling sadly. "But hang out here long enough," our piano-man admonished after a bluesy pause pregnant with an even creepier feeling that was

starting to make the base of my skull feel very cold, "Come in the morning, do the night shift... You gonna meet Willie. And when you meet Willie, you got to make friends with him right away."

Sly chuckled to himself. "Willie make or break you, here. Don't matter if the boss like you, or Eli... Well, Eli don't like nobody... Prop'ty manager, Mistah Leonard the HNIC over here in Capernaum—"

I stopped him. "HNIC?"

Sly grinned a mile of ivory keys. "Head Nigga In Charge. Not even him."

"Okay." *He'd* broken the ice. I chuckled. "I feel you. Nobody's opinion matters here but Willie's. Duly noted. Thanks for the warning. Just one question—"

Sly turned back to the keys, cutting me off in mid-sentence. "You *bring* him somethin', Security. You make *friends* with that old hustler, you ain't got nothin' else to worry about. You don't..."

One hand came out, palm up, in a gesture I knew from out East as the junkie shrug. But Sly looked well-fed, well-rested, free from the clammy gray film of filth that clings to the aura of every opiate addict. He looked *alive*.

Over at his desk, Eli was still writing some Incident Report of his own, paying no attention to us whatsoever. He'd heard it all before. There'd been many of our guards working my side of the house. At twenty hours a week, they never stayed. But for twenty hours a week, I couldn't leave. I took a deep breath.

"Fair enough. Soooo... who the hell is this Willie? Have I met him yet? Is he that guy that always nods out sitting in the ashtray... OK. Never mind. Play it again, Sly..."

Sly was already playing again, you see, "Roun' Midnight", with the pedal to the floor. I gave up, supposing I'd meet this Willie character soon enough, and judge for my own damn self.

Back at my post, sitting perpendicular to the glass Reception booth and watching the front door, I remembered something else I was going to ask Eli, then promptly forgot it on my way back up the ramp.

I stopped where I was. The gray carpet made a static shock spark through the fingers of my right hand when they touched the rail. At my hip, my phone rang.

My phone, that is. The work phone that would only call walkie-talkie numbers was silent in my pocket. The number calling me

wouldn't come up on my phone, only a row of pounds, #####.... I shrugged, hit Go and spoke, still walking up the ramp.

"Go?"

RRHHHHAAAAAAHHHH.... "...Delta-2 DHS Office, right? I'm usin' an old phone book here, this is Patsy Byrd down't the Main Office, we..." RRRHHHHAAH.

I stood still. RHAAAAAAAH. Headed up the ramp and to the left. RHAAAAH shot up to a pathic scream, a veritable tornado of interference, when I moved back toward the old cherrywood piano.

I came back down the ramp, and the scream cycled back down in turn, into, "Oh, well, he probably hung up. I knew it wasn't—"

"Patsy," I said quietly, "No, it's me. This building's terrible for reception. What's on your mind?"

Part of me really was listening, but a gigantic light bulb had just gone on over my head, bathing me in the blinding effulgence of the Obvious. I looked at the tiny bargain-basement phone in my dumb left hand with new respect, remembering a game my big sister and I used to play when we were hunting for Easter eggs, or trying to find where the folks hid the Christmas presents.

That game was called Hot and Cold...

I decided to test a hypothesis that swam up out of the swamp of my own head like an improbable alligator grown to a strange and terrible age, all unannounced, savage and perfectly formed.

"I was wondering what your Sunday looked like," Patsy the swing-shift supervisor asked me, half a world away at the other end of the connection. "Yeah, that area is terrible for phones," she giggled. "I hear they have ghosts. You know, Nadia, bless her little heart," they didn't get along, "Told me EEEHAAAAAH RRRRHAAAAAAH HAAAAAAH—"

I stood over the piano as the static between signal and noise, sender and receiver, white keys and black, swelled again.

Superstitiously touching middle C for good luck. My finger carpet-shocked once more. My eyebrows and nose hairs did something alarming for a hot second, and my ears began ringing. In my hand, the phone howled like one of Dante Alighieri's clients.

I hoofed it back into the lobby, Hot and Cold Hypothesis validated, and apologized my way into turning down Sunday on-call hours at another site when the reception un-FUBAR'ed again.

"I tried," Patsy snapped, "You want more hours, what the hell am I supposed to—"

"Religious observance," I told the dead line. The phone cut out again. RRRR RHAAAAAHHH was all it said.

There was no night shift scheduled at this site on Sunday, but my 'religious observance' would have a guest list of one, possibly two, and take place right in Capernaum. I wanted...

Well, I knew I was just a superstitious hick kid in a grownup skin. But if I took Sly's meaning correctly, I'd be very interested to meet this 'Willie', even ask him some questions, if such a thing were possible.

I thought about that for a long while. My crewcut began to stand at attention.

I wanted to kick off my Docs, and walk instead in the Poet's sandals down that shadowed ramp where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

I wanted to sing the ugliness I saw there every day to sleep for as long as humanly possible, play down the whips and scorns of every level of the welfare state, cleanse the stuffed building of its perilous stuff that weighed upon the heart, light up every corner with song, and make them laugh, and sing along...

I wanted to teach them to climb up backward out of Hell for themselves, reclaim the slope, and escape to the upper air. I wanted to set all the prisoners free; the quick and the dead, the aged and the infirm, the addicted and the insane. I wanted to make myself unemployed.

I wanted Willie to tell me his story, to pour out his heart to me in that fearless, nothing-left-to-lose way so many of the clients did, to tell me who he was and what he had done in life, to answer me without fear of dishonor from the crackling flames of that block-long Inferno.

I betrayed that desire, or the schedule I'd chained myself to betrayed it, for a while, anyway. But sometimes, the real work can't wait. For the moment, I decided to play along.

I brought Willie a black cat bone from the grave of my poor departed feral yard kitty who never really had a name. I brought Willie a white candle I lit in Capernaum the next time I did night shift, a bag of sweet orange gumdrops in a bowl, a stick of incense and the fervent prayer to never break anything again on my shift that could possibly come out of my check...

"I didn't think you were really gonna bring, like, an offering," Nadia observed, her elfin face open and honest behind the Gucci

stunner-shades she hadn't taken off even after sundown.

She was still dubious about the bone, but not saying anything else, fascinated in her almost childlike way by this new thing that never-says-two-words me went and brought to the table.

Nadia'd had a bad day at home, I remembered. Those Gucci stunner-shades hadn't come off, probably so no one would see the way the tears had shot her eyes with blood and think she was stoned or something. I didn't ask. Her story was much more convoluted than mine, but we'd used similar claws to climb up out of Hell.

I'll leave that right there, out of respect, just like Nadia's true age, though she remained flash-frozen on the extreme near side of forty by the abilities that came from her own disabilities, loose screws that ended up making her brain much more efficient during a crisis.

Like me, she'd been through things that would make most of the people we Criminally Trespassed from the building look like model citizens. We were the human liability shields for that block, and for that we ate an enormous ration of shit.

There were Eli, Nadia, myself, and the afternoon lot guard, a Nubian prince of a giant, bald-headed ex-Marine SRT whom everyone there just called Tank. Another man of few words, though these were mostly pleasant, I found also Tank was one of those humans who are just not built to run.

When they do, they look like charging rhinos. Every time he ran, I always looked out the front door to see what he was chasing, or what was chasing him. Usually, it was just a Lost and Found issue in that someone lost something and Tank found it. Good dude.

"Anyway, I'm 10-79," Nadia told me, startling me out of my reverie. "Here's the keys and the phone." She handed over the big keyring and the rubberized bumblebee-colored site Motorola.

As she did, I realized that I'd left my P.M. psych meds sitting on the sink at home. Suddenly, the shift I was beginning looked about fifteen hours long instead of just six.

In any case, I was now flying the plane all by myself, as far as uniformed guards were concerned. Shae and Kathy, two of the caseworkers, were soon departing. The only person over in Capernaum was Sly (who'd stayed late to put a coat of wax on the floor that he was currently cussing out with some of the richest superlatives I have ever heard from any human being outside of North Philly in my life...)

Around seven p.m., I looked up and Time had slowed down to a burning circle of irritability. Their laughter was louder than God in my ears, those two giggly, irrepressible ex-hippie career DHS workers burning the midnight lamp, shuffling past me toward the door to the back offices, back from break with Subway bags and smiles.

"The way that front door was creakin'," Shae, in her purple tie-dyed kimono, bellowed for all to hear, "I swear to god, Kathy, it was like someone was bangin' to get out! I'm never stayin' here late again!"

The remark was rather pointed, though there was nothing I could do about the gremlins in the magnetic locks all over this old, badly-maintained building. The County never fixed anything until it had to, and then they usually put a Band-Aid on it and called it good.

The lights flickered when both women swiped their ID cards through the door. The room got so quiet I could hear Sly's mop slopping hot wax from the bucket and spreading it thin across the tile.

Then my night went to Hell.

In the brassy, immediate smoke of melting motors, both front doors (the one in Capernaum and the one on my side) rared open with screaming sounds of protesting, grinding gears, barking like .38's.

(That made me almost think of something Nadia told me, something about someone getting shot here, but at the moment I was trying not to have a heart attack at 32.)

The lights were flickering, but not like fluorescent bars do when they need changed out. No, this looked to me like rainwater or some worse, unidentifiable gray-glowing substance coming into the sockets from above, making everything wavery and weird, sputtering and smearing my already terrible eyesight into a bad joke on the word Security itself.

There was no water coming in. It wasn't even raining.

I felt something *stride* past me through the front door, taking something else, like tears or a sneeze, *from* me as it went, *striding* with a great, cold footprint, striding under fluorescent bars that flickered out for good beneath the terrible wind of its passage to my right and up the ramp.

There was no room for this in any set of Post Orders any Stupor-visor ever wrote in their lives. There was no way I could ever, ever call this in to Patsy. That old gal would have me involuntarily committed until the century turned *again*.

Yet I heard, I heard, I *heard* the day-old bread racks up in Caper

naum tumble down in a great, ferocious clanging closh and clack of steel wire and stale pumpnickel projectiles that took out several wastecans. I heard Sly stop waxing, and roar, "You take a number like everybody else, up in here!"

The lights all came back on. I bounced to my feet and ran up the ramp...

And stopped dead, agog, hands useless at my sides, as Sly dropped his mop and ran to the piano so fast his outlet Nikes left streaks on his nice new wax-job.

Somehow, I stayed where I was. My hair didn't turn white, my heart didn't go, just...

Nothing. Just a cold kind of nothing, openmouthed astonishment as Sly's great strong hands returned to the keys, generating *Jazz*...

Not the pathetic smooth mainstream stool all over the radio, no, this was *Jazz*, that restless, that roving, that *great vengeance and furious anger* that spun Pain itself into Light, spun long late nights in the wrong spot into gold, spun heartbreak into...

But I hadn't gotten into that 'into' yet, myself, still beat and struggling for a hundred and eleven god damn dollars a god damn week to sit in Limbo and do time and clean up all forms of human waste...

But I came back to that site, after the first day. I came back to hear Sly play again. When nothing else would get me out of bed that week, the music did.

Now his bald head gleamed as he made the action on those keys bleed, playing to the back wall, playing to only me... but not. The actual equation of camera and creator in that room was much more convoluted.

The weirdest part for me, just then, was that Sly didn't look like he was getting anything out, letting go of anything, transcribing or feeling or any other kind of verb at all, except...

Like the man was in great pain, and just *listening*.

Like Sly played with his hands, *through* his hands, listening to somewhere else. Listening, for a still small voice, though what the voice must have sounded like there in the former Bilderberger's Department Store building was not in me to fathom.

Sly turned to look back at me for a split second, possessed as a Vodou dancer. Nothing in his face had changed, but he was feeling his blues all the way now, and chuckling, and oh god all of a sudden there was a towering, crashing glissando and that whatall booming in the

walls behind the piano, booming like an overloaded washer, and...

Sly changed up the song to Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" that Mom used to play on the old Sears stereo in our dining room. Back when I was still taking Suzuki-method piano lessons, and had to be immersed in music like a language, before I threw away my mother tongue and fell to the gutter where Song first grows, and clawed back up...

To this. I shuddered, remembering that I had extra meds in an Altoid tin in my backpack. All would be well. Still unable to blink, I made finger-snapping gestures of applause.

Sly raised a finger of his own without missing a stroke, but his eyes twinkled with merriment. I felt better enough to stride down the ramp and into the foetid Men's room on the left across the tiles, to splash some cold water on my face, across the...

Tiles were patterns of patterns. The light in the Men's Room was tired. This was the creak of the door. The creak of the door did not end

Did not end, behind me, the "Moonlight Sonata" kept right on going, and it was happening again, happening like it always did since they upped my meds, when I missed a dose, since no more booze and no more cigarettes and no more of much of anything except work and time. Time

was kicking my ass, presently, had to take my meds, to remember to take my meds, always moving too fast, or slow...

In the Men's room, I only heard a kind of silence I knew very well, smelled a kind of smell-absence I also knew very well, and the sweat that builds up around cold numb junkie flesh as it eats itself brain-first.

But there was something else in that stall in front of me, something that smelled much worse than some mere bathwater-phobic street junkie who'd somehow nodded out in there past Closing Time. Oh, boy, was there something else. Something

else, behind that inch of stained tan tin, behind the sick gray light within that fell from the stippled, painted fire-glass of the ancient window far above, translated from the sodium streetlights outside. I saw

the belt bounce on the floor, I saw, I saw, pulled down through the buckle and tightened to roughly the width of a skinny arm, falling from that position as it hit tile.

I heard

the clink when the brass buckle landed, green on the backside with sweaty verdigris. I saw, I saw, I was really seeing

the shoes. The shoes, two-tone wingtips, tan and black, so deeply and profoundly cool that Brother Ray himself might have worn them to his first big gig...

Out in Capernaum, Sly was still playing Beethoven. I could hear it through the wall, and the shoes were gently tapping, tapping, tapping on the tile floor, only shoes, and nothing more, but

I saw, and I leaned forward on the toes of my own uncool-by-comparison Doc Martens and my left arm wouldn't work so I dropped it and I I I

OPENED. Finally! Opened! My! Mouth! and I screamed what I wanted to scream! As loud! As! I could! and nothing came out, but then I remembered that we all carry a little spark of God, and I sucked it up and found my Will, and caught the light from the window in my throat and held a breath and let it out, and roared,

"SECURITY, MOTHER *FUCKER!!*"

Then all the lights went out. But not before I saw that the stall was completely empty.

I saw the ancient, discarded cotton ball and piece of surgical tape on the floor. I saw the... shall I say... accident, limning the toilet area and down into the porcelain, like someone fed Jackson Pollock a box of Ex-Lax and pointed him in the general direction of the bowl.

Strange keening sounds were coming from my lungs. I realized I had my flashlight brandished in my free hand. The piano had stopped. I was still standing.

I turned on one heel and went back up the ramp, laying a careful trap in my head. I had to answer a few questions for myself, to my own satisfaction, and like that great detective John Cleese before me, in my own particular idiom.

I put one boot forward, the way anyone would, and began.

On the Sabbath day, I rested before the ritual, in my apartment downtown, moodily drinking coffee and reading the only exorcism manual I could ever trust in this particular case.

"Only Security manual, either, if ya really look at it," I groused through the tea-tree toothpick in my teeth, grasping my green high-lighter and poring back over a Sears Catalogue-sized book called *Lo!*

I flipped again to the section where Charles Fort first defines psychokinesis, poltergeists, and many other words that begin with 'p' as well. *Paranormal. Phenomenon. Possession...*

On my computer, an episode of "The Young Ones" played on

behind me, the great comic actor Nigel Planer as Neil the Hippie running for his life from a "poltergoose" of his own imagining while two Elizabethan ghosts laughed up their ruffled sleeves at him from behind the wall.

After that episode was over, I decided I was just killing time. I gathered my things and took a taxi I couldn't really afford down to the office.

A former boss of mine, an ex-Marine MP, once told me that the secret to being a good guard, or bouncer, or whatever the flavor of Security, is "knowing how to think like one of the bad guys. Like a criminal..."

My key-card worked on all the doors I needed. If anyone asked, I just forgot my wallet. Yeah, this wallet right here in my hand. Found it under over dere-dere. I'll be going now. No issue. (Walks away whistling.)

I knew where the candles were kept in the kitchen, white candles all, and gold, warm safe colors to burn clean, to call...

To call the Dark into the Light, and give it shape, to shrink the Unknown down to pocket size. To set the restless spirit free, and let it sing all it had seen...

My thoughts were falling into a kind of shuffle-boogie as I drew a five-pointed star in sidewalk chalk under the piano bench and lit candles in a circle all around. Every cup or bowl holding a candle was filled with clean salt water, rose petals from the kitchen trash, sweet oil and red brick dust.

I listen, you see. I take notes. It's not as if I'm drowning in work, at that damn lobby post. Every old Vodou queen and country girl with a head full of Grandmamma's *conjur* who's ever walked through every site like that I've ever worked, well...

Witchy women like to talk a lot. Most of those old wives have no idea I collect their tales, in a kind of instant genetic imperative like a bee collecting pollen on his legs.

I already told you, I'm shit-poor. Anything that can help me survive is fair game for my recall, and things like folk-witchcraft are a hell of a lot cheaper than a gun.

I lit the last candle, and made the sign Old Lady Two-Head up on Webster told me to make right about now. I was immediately sorry.

In the kitchen, a whole row of what sounded like big institutional cans of pudding began exploding against the cinderblock walls in a daisychain I was glad I couldn't see.

I was in uniform, even then, just in case the wrong people came knocking, or John Q. Law dropped by for a social call. With my heart in my throat, triggered into a flashback not even half as bad as what was actually going on now...

Even then, my inner witness, my inner bouncer, knew that having to explain the Issue that was currently coming toward me like Sherman took Atlanta, like Grendel took Hart Hall, was beyond my power.

Coming toward me. Without a shape. Coalescing in the air, pure percussive...

Power unleashed itself in that room, blowing the candles out, dropping the chain on the metal portcullis gate that slammed shut in the middle of the wheelchair ramp, sealing off my one unlocked point of egress.

"FUCK." But then I remembered some more folk Vodou and got to my feet, suddenly unafraid, undaunted, un-anything except fed up, snapping, letting the side down all the way, for all to see....

"God damn you!!!" I shrieked in the general direction of the noise. "Enough of this cat-and-mouse shit!! In the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph; in the name of Damballah, Ayida and Simbi, what are you after?!? What do you WANT?!?"

In my hand, my phone suddenly rang with a tone I never programmed into it, a beat I knew from John Lee Hooker...

I looked up and around fearfully, but not a shadow was out of place. The gate was still down, but all the lights were on for the moment. The area was reasonably Code 4, as we called it on the radio. All Was Well.

Self-conscious and uncertain, I muttered a brief prayer to anyone listening, and hit GO.

From: Undisclosed Recipient

I
want
t
o
PLAY
!

My left arm didn't work. The phone clattered to the floor. I felt...
...Fucked-up, to be quite honest; like, chemically fucked-up, the way it felt sometimes in the Bad Old Days to pop a couple of Vicodin

on top of beer, except this numbness froze my extremities in hideous neuropathy, and made me itch, and itch, and itch, like a lizard shedding its skin.

It made my body want to vomit, out of fear of missing its next appearance, its next cold, seeking mouth to open somewhere on my skin, my thigh, the inside of my foot...

Oh, hell, no. This was somewhere I had never traveled, sensations I'd never felt, by choice. I was just a garden-variety alcoholic, but the whole rainbow of awful sensations inside and out were making me walk and twitch and scratch the insides of my forearms like a....

"Like a junkie," I whispered, all my raw nerves right there, really feeling what it felt like to be one, with the Grace of God nowhere in sight... or was it? Did anyone deserve this demonic possession, this chemical parasite and opioid genocide mill on every corner, on every block, in every SRO hotel?

They were the zombie I saw in the mirror in dreams I couldn't admit. We were all their parents and original. We gave them bodies...

I leaned behind me and vomited on the tile, vomited and vomited until nothing would come up except this phosphorescent gray crap that worried me a little bit. No blood, though. After I couldn't even cough up any more of the gray stuff, I hunted around for something to wipe my mouth.

Sly'd left a handkerchief on the piano, an unused blue one folded into a tricorn shape. I made my shaky, clammy way over and sat down at the piano-bench, gratefully daubing the unearthly puke from my face. When I was done, I

...Was done, and turned around, the cold sick sweat gone from every pore. My black SECURITY ballcap was back on my head.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Behind me, Nadia stepped into the room, dark eyes hooded with fatigue. "I came down here to study," she said slowly. "I got Corrections entrance exams soon. You..." She thought a moment. "You never told me you played the piano."

One boot was still on the LOUD pedal. I removed it guiltily, like she'd walked in on me shooting up in the bathroom or something. My fingertips were red, and felt like they'd been flattened with very small hammers, about the size of...

Piano keys. The piano was still humming, the strings inside cycling out the waves of a song I hadn't been around to hear. I'd been shoved up into the corner of my eye, no more in my body than...

A thought occurred to me. My smile hid itself easily, but the snorted chuckle made Nadia frown. "What's funny?" she asked. I bit my lip, and made myself say it:

"The lessons were free."

On the eighth day's morn, I thought I knew it all. I thought I understood the real offering I was supposed to bring Willie.

I thought I knew Jack Shit. But Jack just left Town...

"Sly," I was totally at a loss, wishing I hadn't just quit smoking. I held up the printout of that morning's email. "Mack Blue at the Long Goodbye, you know, over on Eleventh in the Northwest, he wants you to come sit in on keys."

I wasn't looking at Sly's face, childishly expecting the reaction I thought I'd get, plowing on ahead. "I told him you were the only reason I come to work, anymore, just to hear you play. He says he wants to hear, too, and he's been in the industry forty years."

Sly stopped me with one word.

"No."

"B-but, but..." I wanted to tell him that it took a lot of chutzpah to put my hat in my hand and beg Mr. Blue for an audience. Though he seemed like a nice enough guy, from the few times I'd seen him play out, the great jazz drummer was just that, a Great Jazz Drummer.

I did everything but put my forehead to the floor when I wrote to him. He had that kind of respect coming. As did Sly.

Or so I thought at the time. But after the next bolt of knowledge, I had a whole different kind of respect for Sly than I did for any musician who ever lived. Or almost anyone else, (with a few possible exceptions throughout History.)

"I 'preciate the thought, Security," he said, giving me the pounds. (I bumped his fist with mine, trying to make both hands stop shaking.) "Don't trouble y'self about it."

One cautionary index finger swung toward me. When I looked into his eyes, I realized for myself, *Did you ever THINK you had it rough? That you'd hit bottom? That you knew what Down In It looked like and could find your way around that dark country unassisted? The fuck you did. You know nothing. Now shut up and listen to him play...*

"I'd love to sit in at The Long Goodbye," Sly said slowly, "I already know Mack. But he don't know me here. I..." He was struggling to make me understand without saying too much.

"No matter what, we are *spirit*," Sly told me, "We are *spirit-bein's*,

an' we can't let our day-to-day selves be controlled by no spirits other than our own. Or if we do—" he shot me a look, "We best make *damn* sure we got an understanding wit'em. You feel me, Security?"

All the light went out of Sly's eyes. I saw, for the first time, how sad and old he really looked when he wasn't sitting at the piano bench.

"I ain't the playa'," he admitted. My eyes felt like they were growing as wide as the wheel covers on a Humvee. "I'm just the piano."

I had to sit down. Sly offered me a cigarette, making gestures at the door. I shook my head. "But thanks."

Sly shuffled over and rolled the piano bench back to a companionable distance in front of me. With neither prompting nor fuss of any kind, he launched in on an answer to the question I hadn't dared to ask.

"I had my first job here, when it was Bilderberger's," he admitted softly. "I was a stockboy. Cops caught up to a guy in here who cowboyed the Rexall up on Webster. Ran him down in the bathroom." He gestured to the Men's room door.

"Willie used to play piano in the lobby, for his day job, when he wasn't out burnin' down the juke-joints with folks like Mack Blue. He took his lunch intravenously, ya see, went in to the Men's room on break to take a fix, and who the fuck know who shot first? Fuck difference it make, any damn way? "

His breathing was ragged. Mine was held completely. He looked in my eyes.

"I just came in to smoke a jay. Never got to. I held his head when he died, son. I heard the death-rattle. Cops didn't care that Willie was the best piano player this town ever saw. He was JumpTown, man, he was live blues music in Portland, period, he was..."

"He was a genius," I heard myself whisper, suddenly remembering Mistah Willie's last name, and several articles I'd read in several papers at several identical hurry-up-and-wait gigs around the County. "Papers don't talk about what happened to him. Now I know..."

All of a sudden, I couldn't see. I felt the blues rumble down through me like the worst kind of Cyclopean hunger that ever was, all blind lightning in the vein. I stopped talking for a moment, hearing the voice of a small-time junkie named Malcolm Little in my ears from a tape loop on the History Channel, and somehow managed to speak myself.

"You know what a white cop calls a black genius, don't you, Sly?"

When Sly looked at me again, the gulf between minor and major on that particular keyboard suddenly made no difference.

"Matter of fact, I do," he croaked back. "'Nigger.' Hey, you all right, Security." He reached up and gave me the pounds, but it felt different this time. He felt it too.

"You took some of Willie with you," he whispered. "Smart-ass white boy playin' dumb. Hey, can you fill in for me on Tuesday? I gotta go get a tooth looked at. Willie be mad as hell if he don't have—"

I held up one hand. "No explanation necessary. I... I need something to do in between patrols, a lot of the time, anyway. Does he..."

My eyes filled up. "Can Willie *teach*, as well as come *through*? I want," I swallowed hard, "I always wanted to learn this one Roscoe Gordon song..."

Sly frowned elaborately. "You know, I been horse to that ol' *loa* since the night he died, and I never have asked him that," he realized for the first time. Something boomed in the wall behind us, but just once.

"Okay, now, Willie!" Sly roared, looking at me apologetically. "I keep him. He can't go from here until his time is up. He still... he still don't quite understand what happened to him."

"Jesus." I digested that. "So..."

But Sly was nowhere near done. "Right, right. I got to train you how to talk to 'im. That right there was Yes. Two bumps, by theyself, is No. Where you goin'?"

"To get my notebook," I replied quickly, "I wanna get this right the first time..."

CODA:

Nadia set my journal down, smirking briefly at the big black letters that read merely SECURITY across the stained green cover. She didn't smirk long.

"You have him," she whispered, "You have him right here." I'd blacked out everything I didn't want her to see, but the parts about Sly were highlighted. (Copies had been made of the originals, by full permission of Senior Staff.)

"If there was anything you could do, you would have done it," Nadia told me shortly. "Quit kicking your own ass."

She took the very small obituary from me and squinted at it again. "Says here it was a blood clot got him, in the middle of a frickin' root

canal. A whatchamacallit, like an embolism. Those little bastards like to sit up in your blood vessels and hide, and wait for the worst time to come out. Nobody coulda seen it comin'. You have to understand that."

"I can't believe it took three weeks for the news to get to us, though," I groused. "Security's always the last to know anything—"

Nadia wagged her finger at me. "Careful, piano-man. You don't work here no more."

I grinned a mile of battered yellow ivory. "This ain't *workin'*." My eyes looked worse than any junkie's, but I was sober, and out of uniform.

I was volunteering at Capernaum, when I wasn't playing Merlin's proverbial reel right into the tip pitcher that the owner put out for me on top of that balky old Steinway grand piano that takes up half the back stage at the Long Goodbye.

Me. Yeah, me, god damn it. Me, with the dead junkie whine of my new gunnery sergeant off the air in my ears, not like he would be if I was in front of the Casio at home with those ten... god... damn... books of classical music arranged by the great Dr. Shinichi Suzuki and the tapes, and the CD's, and the...

And the chance. And the shining, shining chance when I put on those candles, and smoked the corners off that last chunk of hash, and let Willie come through. People love to teach, I've found, and the dead have just as much to impart. I just never thought that one of them could impart spatulated fingertips and sore wrists, dark circles under the eyes and the cough that won't go away though I haven't tasted one of those delicious Pall Mall lights in almost a year.

No, Willie never came out with me to the club. He couldn't, you see, just like Sly said.

But I brought them the .mp3's back on Mack's cunning little minidisc recorder. The night before, for the first time, Mr. Blue even let me sit in, and in their names we four tore the damn roof off the joint and drove the foundation into the core of the Earth. I was going to tell...

"Sly..." I swallowed the continent in my throat, looking my former co-worker openly in the eyes. "His timing was just... impeccable. Like he was..."

"Training you?" Nadia filled in instantly. "I swear, everyone around here hides their light under a bushel. You know that one guy with the goiters can sing like Al Green, I never even imagined..."

I listened for a while, and wept for a while longer, but I knew that wouldn't last.

Sure enough, like clockwork, around twenty after four...

WHACK. Something boomed in the wall, skipping through the heavy air like a stone, glancing off my face. I looked up. My left hand...

My left hand had no idea what my right hand was playing. Next thing I knew, I was back at the piano and Nadia was looking at me like...

Like she knew. Like she knew the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Nadia was a good officer. She pieced things together... by listening.

The week before, Eli decided he'd had enough, after twelve years, and moved on. I know now that I can clock off any time I want to from this site. But I can never, ever leave.

That day, Willie, Sly and I, humble votary between Now and Then, Blues and Jazz, ebony and ivory, got through "Roun' Midnight" all the way for Nadia and the stunned, delighted Tank, who sat up in his seat and beamed like a boy of fifteen, clapping his hands so loud I thought we were having a drive-by.

Tank said something haltingly about how I played Monk just like Sly, and I so desperately wanted to let Sly come through me, and speak...

But it ain't about that. Only in song. I pay my respects every day, whether or not we have a gig. This debt is to be paid in private, without a marquee out front announcing who's really on the bill.

I'm not the player, either, you see. Just an old song, a lead and a harmony... in an only-slightly-used piano, one with enough action left in the keys for one pupil and two of the wisest teachers that Portland ever produced.

I come here to do my time, and take my wounds from it gladly. I come to give back. I think I'm finally beginning to understand what that means.

I come to sit in with the dead, and accept their invitation to the blues.●

FOR STANLEY

CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

Jeff Beazley ("The Thirteenth Tree," page 15) lives in rural Derbyshire. He started writing in the summer of 2002 and has produced forty-three short stories and a novella followed; nineteen of them have now been published with a couple more waiting in the wings. Being what most people would describe as 'a bit strange', the majority of his stories are speculative in nature.

Rob Brooks ("Unnatural Blonde," page 33) is a writer and stay-at-home dad. He's recently had work featured in *A Thousand Faces: The Quarterly Journal of Supernatural Fiction* and the Necrotic Tissue anthology *Malpractice*. He blogs at <http://robbrooksfirstnovel.blogspot.com>.

George Cotronis ("Wraith Skull," cover art) is a Swedish artist whose work is largely featured on CD covers and in role-playing games. His portfolio can be seen at <http://www.vonhelvete.com>.

Nandi Ekles ("The Old House," page 45) is an award-winning writer who writes tales of mystery and thrillers from her home in Texas. She actively enjoys all venues of the writing community including webook.com where she has been a "Top Writer" and "Top Feedbacker." She is also a board member of the Panhandle Professional Writers, one of the oldest writers' groups in the United States.

Eric W. Jepson ("Happy St. Patrick's Day," page 52) has worked in newspapers, education and the removing of stickers from cardboard boxes. He has previously killed off fictional characters for *Quantum Muse*, *Nossa Morte*, *Dialogue* and other fine venues. He is the editor of *The Fob Bible* to be released in June; his first novel, *Byuck*, though remarkably free of dead bodies, is also forthcoming. He homesteads online at <http://thmazing.com> but does most of his talking at <http://thmazing.blogspot.com> and <http://twitter.com/thmazing>.

J.C. Koch ("Road Rage," page 13) is scared by horror stories but writes

them anyway, blogs about being a horror writer at Going Bump in the Night (<http://jckoch.blogspot.com/>), was a First Place winner of *Necrotic Tissue's* 2008 "Halloween Horror Haiku" contest.

Maura McHugh ("The Diet," page 65) is a 2006 Clarion West Writers Workshop graduate. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Shroud Magazine*, *Black Static*, *Doorways Magazine*, *Paradox Magazine*, and other venues. Her website is <http://splinister.com>.

Edward Morris ("To Soothe the Savage Beast," page 78) is a 2005 British Science Fiction Association Award nominee and 2009 Rhysling Award Nominee. His work has appeared in *Murky Depths* thrice, *Interzone* twice, and forty-three other markets. Mercury Retrograde Press has just bought Morris' nine-book horror-SF series *There Was A Crooked Man*, which Morris began at age eleven. He blogs at <http://edwardrmorrisjr.blogspot.com>

Nicholas Ozment ("The House on Waterloo Lane," page 5) teaches English at Winona State University. He has written for *Weird Tales*, *Mythic Delirium*, various anthologies, and the podcasts *Pseudopod* and *Clone Pod*. He reviews horror films for *Down in the Cellar* and, with co-host David Manning, endures the most bizarre B-movies at *Manning's Manly Movies*. He blogs at <http://ozment.livejournal.com>.



Cold Fusion Video Reviews

Every week,
critic Nathan
Shumate dissects
genre cinema –
Sci-Fi, Horror, and
General Whoopass
– until it begs
for mercy.

www.coldfusionvideo.com



WWW.ARKHAMTALES.COM